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PALADIN

GRACE ANNESLEY
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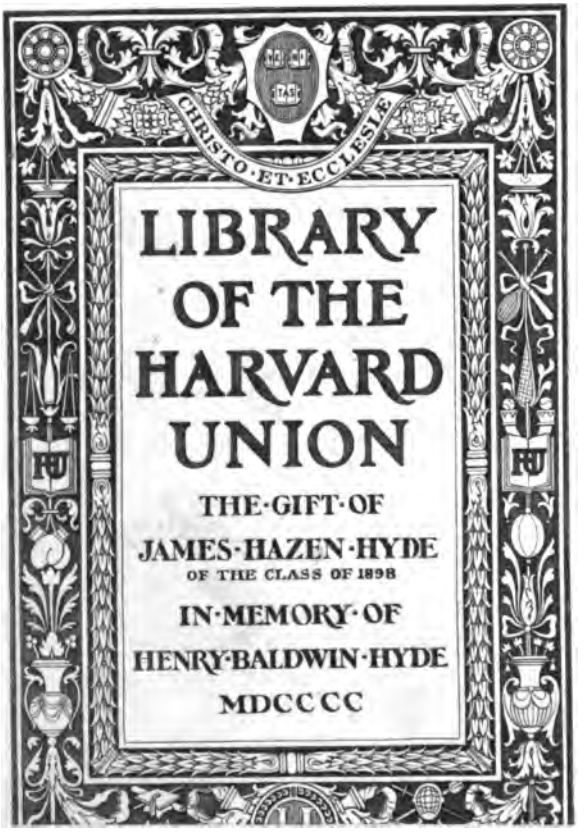

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THE PALADIN

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LIFE AND SPORT ON THE PACIFIC SLOPE
THE PALADIN

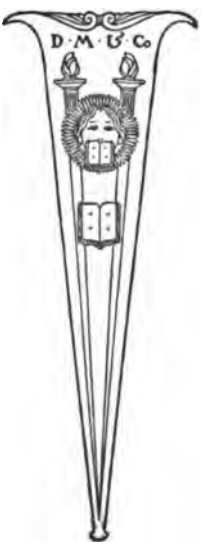
THE PALADIN

As Beheld by a Woman of Temperament

BY

HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL

AUTHOR OF "BROTHERS," "THE HILL," ETC.



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Published, October, 1909

I dedicate this book
to my little daughter

Lydia Lyttelton Annesley Hackell

and to other maids of high and low degree
who, by a perusal of its pages, may learn,
perhaps, that seeming paladins cannot be
taken with impunity at their own valuation

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BOOK I

CHAPTER I

WHICH INTRODUCES OUR PALADIN

ESTHER shed no tears when the lamentable news was told to her by the doctor, who had been summoned hastily in the middle of the night. The blow was so sudden and heavy, as if dealt by a bludgeon, that its effect was to deaden rather than quicken the girl's sensibilities. Her father had died by his own hand! The other blows which followed—loss of fortune, the sense that she must leave her home and the things she loved—hardly made impress at the moment, so dazed was she by the first brutal assault of fate. Not till long afterwards did she realise that, in the highest sense, she had never loved a father who had given undivided energies and interest to an immense business. To his only child Douglas Yorke had offered toys and sweetmeats, and, as she grew older, whatever else she might want. To ask for anything became to Esther a synonym for receiving it. She never asked for love, because she did not know what love is. Before she was fifteen she had been told that her father spoiled her terribly. This intelligence was accepted calmly, without reflection, in the same spirit with which she accepted chocolates and trinkets. Probably she believed that her father adored her because he gratified every girlish whim. Most undoubtedly she was convinced that she adored him be-

cause he had never scolded her, or found fault, or behaved like the fathers of other girls she knew. Once or twice she had wondered why many fathers kissed and caressed their little daughters. Mr. Yorke had never caressed her, and his kiss, morning and evening, was impressed upon the centre of her forehead.

Next day a sealed envelope was brought to her. It contained a pathetic message:

"I have no excuse to offer for what I am about to do except this: I am too old and too tired to begin life again."

Too old and too tired! Esther wept when she read the unsigned lines. For the first time in her life the ministering angel, ardent to soothe and console, leapt into being. She asked herself passionately: Had she been blind to the fact that he was old and tired? She had never thought of him as old; she had never suspected that he might be tired. Always she had watched him come and go, punctual to the minute, an automaton, the pattern man of business, never flurried, never irritable, never untidy; the very pink of respectability and integrity.

His ruin involved others in ruin. Esther read the papers with a heart-sickness impossible to describe. At the end of a dreadful week she realised that her father was not only dead but dishonoured. A hundred thousand depositors were reviling him.

Of course she had friends who stood by her with a slightly frightened expression in their eyes, which Esther was at no loss to interpret. All these good people were trying to readjust a point of view: always

a delicate, and in this case a somewhat harrowing, achievement. Esther, as the penniless daughter of a splendid imposter, seemed in her turn to have imposed upon everybody who knew her. No one put the common thought into common words till Esther said to Harry Rye: "They look at me as if I ought to have chosen another father."

To this the young man replied promptly, "The beasts!"

"I am the same," continued Esther vehemently. "I've not altered, but they have changed—every one of them."

Rye was in the diplomatic service, and prided himself upon the possession of tact. How could he tell this poor little dear that she had changed enormously. An appalling catastrophe had transmuted her from clay into marble. And he had admired in her the soft qualities, ingenuous faith in others, a sweet disposition, generosity, and kindliness. She had been adorable. Really, it was incredible that she should not know that she, not her friends, had changed.

For some years Rye had told himself that Esther would make him an admirable little wife, provided always that her *dot* was what the world said it ought to be, although he, for his part, would be willing to take her without a sou. That, however, would be unfair on her. He had only seven hundred a year. Esther spent at least as much upon her clothes, probably more. Esther, dowdily dressed, counting sixpences and considering the expediency of rehashing the mutton was quite inconceivable.

It is only fair to Rye to add that from the time he had left Eton the necessity of seeking a mate in the habitations of the very rich had been rubbed like ointment into his plastic and receptive mind. Lady Matilda Rye, his mother, was too clever and charming a person to uphold marriages of convenience, or to worship in public the Golden Calf; and everybody, of course, knew that she had married for love, made a romantic affair of it, a runaway match with a blue-eyed Guardsman! And everybody knew, also, that she had bobbed up, serenely unwrinkled, after fifteen years of storm and stress with her poor dear Reginald, who died miserably of that almost universal disease, intemperance in all things. Lady Matilda and her two children settled down in Pont Street. Three months before the death of Mr. Yorke, the elder of these children, Dorothea—so named because the gift came from heaven just when the blue-eyed Guardsman was beginning to slide rapidly in the opposite direction—had married George Treherne, the head of the famous shipbuilding firm, and at the marriage ceremony, which was honoured by the presence of royalty, Lady Matilda had beamed upon Esther in green gooseberry chiffon, a bridesmaid obviously destined to become in her turn a lovely and happy bride. Dear Harry might have gone a-courting in Surbiton, or at the stage door of the Jollity Theatre, or in some obscure country parsonage. Thanks to Lady Matilda's teaching, never didactic, never obtrusive, her boy had grasped the great truth that sweet, rich, charming girls may be found in dozens upon the wrong side of Hyde Park.

The suspension of payments at Yorke's Bank in Fleet Street nearly reduced Lady Matilda to a condition of collapse. She sent for Harry and implored him to do nothing rash. Harry came away from a memorable interview (Lady Matilda was in bed) acutely sensible that he was "awfully sorry" for the little Mater, "awfully sorry" for Esther, and "awfully sorry" for himself. To a friend at the Foreign Office he muttered gloomily that this was a hard world. The friend, who sometimes asked indiscreet questions, said abruptly:

"What are you going to do, Harry?" and to this Harry replied that he was damned if he knew, but that he could be counted on to do the real right thing.

"This is rather a hard case," said his friend thoughtfully. "How are you going to do the real right thing by your mother *and* by Miss Yorke?"

"I wish you wouldn't mention names," said Harry fretfully.

To another friend he complained that the Fates were not providing a square deal. The young fellow belonged to that gallant company of British youths who believe that the world owes them something. Harry had always been modest, and, under somewhat cruel circumstances, cheery and optimistic. He admitted candidly that the marriage, late in life, of his uncle, Lord Camber, and the subsequent appearance of twin sons, had been "a nasty jar." It is true that his uncle continued his allowance, but Harry felt vaguely that he was one of the unlucky brigade. Camber Castle and forty thousand a year would have suited him down to the ground, and—if he said it himself—the world would

have been a cheerier place if—well, if those confounded twins had not knocked him out.

In presenting our paladin as he was, and allowing him to express himself in his own words, the risk, not a light one, is run of raising a prejudice against him in the minds of the thoughtful and serious. His own medical attendant, Sir Bedford Slufter, who (before knighthood was conferred upon him) had treated in him to a successful issue whooping-cough, mumps, chicken-pox, and German measles, may be quoted as affirming that Harry was a capital fellow, a good sportsman, an affectionate son and brother, a sound cricketer, and an Imperialist. In a popular magazine photographs of Harry at the interesting ages of three, seven, eleven, seventeen, and twenty-four had been reproduced with the significant words beneath: *One of the best.* At seven we see him in a white sailor suit, but, oddly enough, grasping a stick by the wrong end! Why the wrong end? Dare we affirm that coming events were casting shadows before? At eleven he exhibits proudly his first gun, a single-barrelled weapon of small bore. What a handsome curly-headed youngster it is! And he looks the camera straight in the face. We behold him at seventeen in flannels, a member of the Eton XI. and, obviously, a tremendous swell. The large central picture (taken free of charge and copyrighted by an eminent firm in Baker Street) represents him as one of the Gentlemen of England after a glorious victory over the Players.

To Harry Rye Esther turned in her trouble. What she thought of him may be indicated—no more. Esther,

when a small girl, had seen Harry make a century at Lord's in the Eton and Harrow match. After this fine performance he took Esther for a stroll, and treated her to strawberry ice. She said that she preferred vanilla, but Harry was positive that strawberry ice, made from real strawberries, was the better. Esther accepted this statement as gospel, regarding young Rye as a sort of Gamaliel in flannels. She adored him, and he knew it.

Afterwards she came to occupy a definite place in his present and future. Esther, so to speak, was always there. He could think of her comfortably as his for the asking. One of these days they were going to be as happy as larks. Part of the charm—and even Esther would have admitted this—bloomed in the fact that they were not engaged. Harry was twenty-six and Esther twenty. Lady Matilda and innumerable friends smiled and used the word "idyll." The affair, in their eyes, was so appropriate, so obviously fashioned in heaven, so "deevy"—a word coined in those days, and now regrettably become obsolete.

Harry came to Palace Gardens, and sat beside the stricken girl, holding her hand. In a garden of roses by Bendemeer's stream he would have taken Esther into his arms and kissed the tears from her eyes. In a huge drawing-room, upholstered in primrose satin, such ardour might be stigmatised as unseasonable and exuberant. Harry held her hand, and from time to time gently pressed it.

Not many words passed at this first interview, which took place the day after the banker's death, and before

the full extent of the catastrophe was realised. Harry knew that a smash was impending, but his optimistic temperament jumped to the conviction that there must be pickings. The primrose satin upholstery fortified this belief. Esther surely was provided for—decently. Twenty thousand pounds at the very least. That meant economy. He would have to stick to his profession. Esther was just the sort of girl to appreciate the man who worked for her. Accordingly, when Esther whispered, "I suppose you know the bank is shut up?" he replied reassuringly: "Money is not everything; we shall pull through, we shall pull through."

The "we" and the repetition comforted poor Esther. She edged nearer to the cricketer and the Imperialist, but he did nothing rash. Esther told herself that Harry was thinking of the dead man upstairs. Harry told himself that he was doing the right thing, and that the Mater, God bless her! would applaud his self-control and consideration. Don't imagine for an instant that he was invertebrate or cold-blooded. When Esther edged close to him, the desire to do something rash became almost overmastering. For a fraction of a second he could hear himself saying: "My own girl, if I loved you when you were happy and prosperous, don't you know that I love you now ten times as much?" That is what he would have said, had not the little Mater been lying in bed and dabbing a fevered brow with eau de Cologne and water.

George Treherne, with whom Harry dined that same evening, talked mysteriously of defalcations, trust money misapplied, and so forth. Harry rather despised

George, both as man and brother-in-law, but as a financier he was admittedly sound. George shook his long head when Harry muttered something about pickings.

"It's going to be worse than we thought. Will you have another glass of port wine?"

"Thanks," said Harry. As he filled his glass, he added: "Of course Esther has been provided for?"

Dorothea had gone upstairs, leaving the men alone.

"What do you mean?" George replied. "I don't suppose Yorke made a settlement on her and his will, I'm told, is ten years old. If that is the case, Esther probably has been left a large fortune which no longer exists. Old Sol told me this afternoon that the house in Palace Gardens and everything in it was mortgaged a few months ago."

"Who the deuce is Old Sol?"

"The moneylender. It's his business to know these little things. It wouldn't surprise me a bit if the girl had nothing."

"There must be—er—something."

"No 'must' about it. Shall we join Dorothea?"

Dorothea was in the hall, lined with Cipolino marble with panels of blue sodolite from Canada and a mosaic ceiling. The source of light was invisible; a soft glow suffused things and persons with a faint rose-coloured tone. In such a room pessimism is impossible. Harry smoked one of Treherne's best and biggest cigars and drank a glass of 1808 brandy. Dorothea stared at him as if trying to pierce an exterior of well-bred impassivity. For the moment Harry puzzled her.

She divined his distress, but could not measure it. He smoked imperturbably and enjoyed his cigar. He sipped the old brandy. Dorothea had the strange and reprehensible conviction that this indicated heartlessness. Had Harry tossed off three glasses of brandy in swift succession she would have felt more sorry for him. Presently George went to his own room.

"Business?" said Harry, with uplifted brows.

"Business," replied his sister coldly.

"He knew that I wanted to talk to you."

"He would have gone anyway."

Harry said nothing. He had acquired the invaluable habit of shunting disagreeable reflections and conclusions. He was awfully fond of Doll, and it was quite intolerable to think that she had made a mess of her marriage. She must have known what George was like before she married him: a good, steady, plodding fellow, with a heart of solid gold, not to mention a dessert service. But Doll had come back from her honeymoon looking as blue as the sodolite from Canada; and had settled down in Park Lane with an amazing indifference to her position, which provoked from Lady Matilda the word "ungrateful."

"Have you seen Esther?" said Dorothea.

"Of course. I rushed off there the moment I left the office."

A pause followed. Then Dorothea said nervously:

"Are you very fond of her?"

"Good Lord! What a question!"

"Do you care for her more than you care for anybody else in the whole world?"

"If you put it that way, of course I do. Why, Doll, what's up?"

He saw that her cheeks were red and her eyes sparkling. How pretty she was! All the Ryes were good-looking—except those confounded twins, who had taken after their confounded mother.

"If you care for her," said Dorothea vehemently, "this is the opportunity of your life. It's not easy for a woman to know whether she is wanted for herself, or for her beauty, or her money, or her position, but you can prove to Esther that you want her. Are you going to do it? I suppose mother has been at you?"

"We are in a very complicated position."

"What—humbug!"

"Really, Doll, if I hadn't seen you drink water at dinner, I should say that the Dagonet had been too much for you. Are you mad?"

"I am, at last, hopelessly and incurably sane."

"I don't pretend to understand women. The more they have, the more they seem to want. At any rate, out of regard for the Mater, to whom you'll admit I owe something, and in common decency—Mr. Yorke won't be buried till the day after to-morrow—I'm going to mark time."

"Poor Esther!"

"Suppose she has nothing. George says it's quite possible. Do you think she could be happy on seven hundred a year?"

"Yes."

"You are quite cracked."

Dorothea made the last attempt.

"If you spoke to Uncle Camber, he might—I believe he would—increase your allowance."

Harry stiffened immediately.

"When I marry I'm not going to pass round the hat. I told Esther that money was not everything, and it isn't to me," he added with slight emphasis. "One can't talk about such things; *you* know I could have had that little millionairess from Michigan; but first and last I've been faithful to Esther. I'm thinking of her, not of myself."

Dorothea yawned and opened a book. It was not polite, but it inspired the reflection in Harry's mind that whenever a woman begins by being grossly unfair to a fellow, she generally ends by being rude into the bargain. Shortly afterwards the young man took his leave and returned to Pont Street, walking home, as the night was fine. He strolled down Park Lane, beholding the motives which inspired marking time by the light of the moon, shall we say, rather than the sun. Had he, after all, done the real right thing? Dorothea indicated a high adventure, a romantic opportunity. Long ago, upon the occasion of his famous century against Harrow, made at a moment when experts in the Pavilion were beginning to fear that a "rot" was setting in, one of the many gentlemen who write with ease rather than elegance upon British pastimes had described him as "lion-hearted." Our Harry had tried to live up to this transcendent adjective. And, afterwards, in greater matches, when he had valiantly faced the most deadly bowlers in the kingdom, other

epithets had been showered upon his embayed head. He was a "tryer," he was "the famous Old Etonian," he was "fearless"—"dauntless"—"a thruster!" In a rosy-hued paper, where some licence is allowed, he was acclaimed enthusiastically as possessing—let us turn the monstrous monosyllable into Latin—*viscera!* Many cricketers, apparently, lack these organs. Would Bertrand du Guesclin have turned his broad back upon a dowerless Tiphaine?

Our paladin felt uncomfortably warm when he put these questions to himself. And then, very insidiously, Dorothea's subtle suggestion of an increased allowance from his uncle percolated to the core of his being.

Perhaps George Treherne would do something!

CHAPTER II

THE PALADIN'S LITTLE MATER

LADY MATILDA glanced with satisfaction at her pretty drawing-room in Pont Street. To this smiling, good-natured, self-complacent lady possession was not nine-tenths of the law, but the law itself and all the prophets. She loved everything that belonged to her; and she beheld her possessions (we include the children) magnified and embellished beyond compare. Many of the objects upon which her eye lingered with special affection had been bought, at a price considerably below their value, in country curiosity shops and cottages. Lady Matilda invariably offered a sum less than that asked, and, as invariably, she indicated blemishes. But the articles paid for, blemishes vanished. Her treasures became perfect specimens because they belonged to her. Very seldom indeed did she admire what belonged to others. Even the snuff-boxes at Hertford House left her perfectly calm, although she would rave for a quarter of an hour over a "ducky" little Lowestoft teapot which "I got, my dear, for a song from a funny old woman in Somerset; it came to her from her grandmother."

The world liked Lady Matilda because she was plucky and cheery. Only Lord Camber knew how she managed to pay her bills, but paid they were on the first of every month. Her servants, four in number,

did the work of six, not because they received high wages, but because, instead, the kind word in season was never lacking. Lady Matilda kept very careful accounts, but it is doubtful whether she computed the value of the kind word.

She had been the best or the worst of mothers, according to your point of view. The least we can do is to believe that she acted according to her lights. No one questioned her devotion.

When it became certain that Esther Yorke was dowerless, Lady Matilda sought and found solace in the contemplation of her furniture, bought before Chippendale and Sheraton became the rage. Each inanimate object represented the triumph of good over evil, accepting as "good," without any perplexing reference to the New Testament, Lady Matilda's own comfortable code of ethics. The Chippendale cabinet, for instance, had been bought at a moment when poor dear Reginald was obliged to give up hunting owing to a weak heart—a condition caused by excessive smoking of cigarettes. The money which hunting represented was spent by Captain Rye upon himself; but in recognition of his wife's devotion as nurse he allowed her to buy the cabinet.

Staring at the cabinet, and faintly smiling, Lady Matilda came to a decision. It was alien to her principles to hit anyone who happened to be down. When down herself, people had been kind to her. Nevertheless it would be mistaken kindness to allow Esther to linger any longer in a fool's paradise. She was fortified in this decision by the strange and unfilial conduct

of her Harry, who, for the first time in his life, was withholding his confidence. When she mentioned this to Dorothea, the daughter said coldly:

"I may be to blame. I advised him to marry Esther, money or no money!"

"What!"

"She is a girl in ten thousand."

"Would George support them?"

"If I asked him, George might do something; so might Uncle."

"I thought my daughter had some pride."

"Disillusion yourself, mother. I hav'n't a scrap left. Let me add this for your comfort: I don't think Harry will take my advice. He thinks me mad."

"So do I," said Lady Matilda, with much asperity for so sweet-tempered a woman.

Of course she knew in her heart that Harry was quite likely to take any advice that might happen to chime with his inclinations, which at the present moment must be ringing a wedding peal. And if, as was more than probable, Dorothea had indicated the heroic opportunity, the high adventure, Harry might do something rash, because he was Reginald Rye's son, with his father's seductive blue eyes and, latent within him, that father's recklessness and contempt of consequences. Years of patient training might be obliterated in one ill-considered moment.

Instinct told her that moment was at hand. Thanks to her, the first and second and third interviews between the young people had produced nothing more fervent than protestations of sympathy and friendship. Harry

was marking time. But now the worst was known. Esther had nothing but her frocks and her trinkets. Harry could mark time no longer, and that odious friend of his in the Foreign Office was a sentimentalist, a love-and-a-cottage simpleton!

Lady Matilda took a last look at the cabinet, and went upstairs. She arrayed herself carefully in black and lavender, and, on her way to Palace Gardens, stopped at a florist's to buy a large bunch of Parma violets. These, with an affectionate kiss, she presented to Esther, who had wit enough to scent the Danaan nature of the gift.

"I suppose Harry has told you everything?" began Esther.

"Yes," said Lady Matilda with bland assurance. If Harry had deliberately hidden anything of importance, this full-throated "yes" might bring it to light.

"I hav'n't a halfpenny," said Esther. "To be accurate," she added, "there is a small sum which will keep me alive till I get work."

"Work? What work, dear?"

"I'm thinking of the stage. Why not?"

The interrogation had an uplifting note of defiance. Some of Esther's friends had answered the question in a spirit of indignation and finality. Esther, it was pointed out, had no affiliations with the stage; she had exhibited no special aptitudes for such a profession: the competition was heart-breaking and everlasting; and the associations with persons regarded, until quite lately, as rogues and vagabonds must be stigmatised as lowering and undesirable. One friend, Mrs. Rock-

ingham Trigg, had offered Esther the situation of companion to an aged and infirm aunt, who lived in Eaton Place, and was willing to pay thirty pounds a year, with board and lodging, to an amiable, ladylike young person. Esther replied that Eaton Place was too far from the Thames. When her astonished visitor demanded an interpretation, Esther laughed, pleasantly enough, and said: "You see, I could never drown myself in cold blood. The walk from Eaton Place to Westminster Bridge would take all the starch out of me." The good Samaritan went away shaking her head. She remarked to her aunt: "Not even Providence can help those who refuse to help themselves!" A stickler for the powers plenipotentiary of the Creator might have taken exception to this observation, but we know what the good, kind soul meant: and she liked her little aphorism so well that she repeated it to everyone of her acquaintance.

Lady Matilda paused for an instant before speaking. Then she said gently:

"Don't think me impertinent, but surely you have some relations?"

Esther shook her head.

"My father's people are furious with him; I couldn't stand their pity or their patronage."

"And your mother's people, dear?"

"My mother's people? I suppose my mother had people. Father never spoke of her or them."

"How very, *very* odd!"

"So, you see, I have nobody to consider but myself. And I might do well on the stage, don't you think so?"

"You are pretty, clever, and you have a delightful voice."

"I know Henry FitzRoy, the actor-manager."

Lady Matilda nodded.

"I'm sure he'll help. Don't forget to mention my name. I introduced him to the dear Prince, and he was *so* grateful."

"Then you really think well of my little plan?"

Lady Matilda blinked. Then she took Esther's hand in hers and patted it maternally. Her manner was perfection.

"I do—I do. If a girl can earn a living on the stage or anywhere else, let her do it, say I."

"Harry is not of your opinion."

"Oh! Does he suggest anything?"

"He says I must mark time."

An inaudible sigh of relief parted Lady Matilda's lips. Perhaps, after all, she had done Harry an injustice.

"Knowing Harry," she began softly, "knowing the tenderness of his heart, and his temperament, so like his father's, I was terrified lest he should propose something rash."

"What do you mean?"

Lady Matilda permitted the shadow of a frown to flit across her placid forehead. Esther's question displayed a certain lack of breeding and tact. Nothing is so exasperating as to be compelled to use a blunderbuss when you are master of a rapier.

"He is very chivalrous, my dear."

"Is he?" Esther considered this seriously.

"You must know what he is. He has the nice old-fashioned ideas about women."

"He has never mentioned them to me."

"How very odd! Oh, yes, Harry believes that women must be protected and cherished, treated as delicate porcelain, and—er——"

"Kept under lock and key."

"Exactly."

"Is that being chivalrous?"

Again Lady Matilda frowned. Esther was making things difficult to one who prided herself upon making things easy. However, she answered mildly: "I'm not very good at expressing myself, but you know what I mean."

"I think I know what you mean," said Esther, "but I should like to be sure. You have been terrified lest Harry should ask me to marry him."

"My dear!"

"Lady Matilda, only the plainest speaking is possible between us. Harry, perhaps, is too chivalrous to ask me to share comparative poverty with him. Let us leave it at that, if it pleases you. But, if he had spoken, if he had been"—she paused and brought out the word "rash" with a derisive little smile—"I should have said 'No.' If I had wanted his love more than anything else in the world, I should have said 'No.' Have I made myself plain?"

"You are a girl of spirit."

"Don't flatter me! I'm a girl of temperament—the creature of impulse. I will be absolutely frank with you. There was one moment, only one, when I

might have taken Harry if he had asked me. That was the first day, when I did not know how bad things were. Will you promise me that you will never let Harry know this?"

"My poor child, of course."

"I'm not so poor as you imagine. I mean to make my way. I am not afraid of work, but I should resent being kept under lock and key."

"We shall all stand by you, dear."

"No; I shall drop out. Pity hurts horribly. And my great weakness is that I'm afraid of pain. I hardly know what pain is. I have never been uncomfortable; I have never been lectured, or slighted. Bad times are coming, but I'm not afraid—yet."

Lady Matilda kissed her with genuine affection.

"Of all the girls I have known," she said regretfully, "you are the nicest and the pluckiest."

"Plucky?" said Esther, with a twist of her lip. "Well, that remains to be seen."

When Lady Matilda went away, Esther returned to her sitting-room, once the schoolroom, and the only room in the vast mansion which reflected personality. In a corner stood a doll's house gorgeously furnished. Esther had played with dolls till she was fourteen, partly because she had an imagination, partly because she was loyal to things and persons who were a source of entertainment to her. The dolls lay in state in a mahogany tallboy, and often Esther would open the drawers and ask her old favourites how they fared. She was whimsically sensible that she had not treated some of them with forbearance. She had smacked an

ear off a beautiful creature merely because she simpered and looked silly. Another sparkler had been spanked, after trial by jury, because it was certain that she scorned the Gollywog. A lovely lady from Paris wore sackcloth. Her magnificent trousseau had been given to an English doll who was ugly and, supposedly, virtuous. No greater punishment can be inflicted upon a gay Parisienne.

Take away the doll's house and the mahogany tallboy, and the room became, perhaps, obtrusively pretty. Esther admitted that she placed too high a value upon what pleased the eye. She adored flowers, and delicate fabrics, softly tinted porcelain, and books bound in white vellum, fancifully tooled. Near the fireplace a divan was piled high with some eiderdown cushions.

Upon this divan Esther reclined, thinking of Lady Matilda, of Harry, and of Dorothea. Dorothea had been a friend. Her marriage justified the use of the past tense. Esther knew George, and liked him, but he was a man without enthusiasm, cold as a fish, unlovable. Why had Dorothea married him? To sip coffee in a hall lined with blue sodolite? To wear bigger diamonds than other women? To make a splash? To reply affirmatively to any of those questions exhibited ignorance of Dorothea. She was a Gallio in regard to material things. Perhaps she had fled from her mother. Esther recalled an Eastern proverb: "As the sands of the desert are to the weary traveller, so is overmuch speech to him who loveth silence." George had the gift of silence. He was like one of the strong, dumb men

in Henry Seton Merriman's novels. To his silence the distracted Dorothea may have sped as to an oasis.

When the engagement was announced, Esther looked forward to heart to heart talks. She admired Dorothea enormously. Lady Matilda and Harry always spoke of her in superlatives. But for that matter, everybody knew that mother and son were a mutual admiration company with large assets and irreducible liabilities. Lady Matilda never looked so charming as when she was exhibiting photographs of her children to the stranger within her gates. "This is my boy," she would say, "the dearest fellow. I think you know my girl. Yes, as you say, *very* distinguished, and the most devoted daughter. What those darling children have been to me——!"

Nothing is so tiresome as a mystery, so we will hasten to explain why there were no heart to heart talks between Dorothea and Esther. Dorothea did appreciate silence; and she found out before she was ten years old that her mother, constitutionally and temperamentally, was unable to keep a secret. Harry, also, chattered indiscreetly. Accordingly, early in life, Dorothea learned to hold her tongue. Because of this, friends confided in her, notably Esther, and carried away by the beatitude of giving confidence, few paused to observe that they were receiving nothing in return. Then Dorothea fell in love with a man who was flirting with her. He married somebody else; Dorothea, out of pique, said "Yes" to the faithful George, who happened to propose upon the evening of the day when the engagement of the other man was announced. Because she

could not marry the man she wanted, she took the man who wanted her.

Esther, ingenuous and guileless, though not ignorant, could not understand what had happened. Dorothea's reserve, so solid and indestructible, made Esther's outpourings appear thin and flimsy. "She thinks me a gusher," Esther muttered to herself. And if she had known it, Dorothea was dying to speak with entire frankness—and couldn't!

Habit had made her tongue-tied.

Alone in her room, Esther underwent a reaction. She had confronted Lady Matilda with a derisive smile, but she saw herself through tears—tears which she despised, and yet recognised as the inevitable successor of smiles. She believed in the rhythm of life. She had had her good times, and the bad times were at hand—lean years of struggle and renunciation.

Three cups of tea shed a rosier light upon the future. Her eyes were clear and bright when the solemn butler, already under notice to leave, announced that Mr. Rye was in the drawing-room. Esther had not seen Harry for three days, but she had written to announce her definite intention of going on the stage.

She arranged her hair, which had a tinge of red in it, before she went downstairs. Examining herself in the glass, she could not deny that she was nice-looking, although at times her face exasperated her, for she happened to be devoid of vanity. Her complexion, pale but clear, enhanced the value of her big hazel eyes and red mouth. She found great fault with her mouth. It had an annoying droop to it. As a child she could re-

member overhearing whispers: "What a sad little darling!" But she was not sad, and never had been sad. Fortunately her nose had a tiny tilt to it. "My nose despises my mouth," Esther would say. Certainly the nose indicated a saucy defiance. The brow was quite charming, low and wide, and the hair waved from it naturally. Obstinacy perched itself upon her chin. Judging by appearances you would declare: "Here is a creature of impulse, who has never come in contact with anything sordid and mean; she has never entertained an unbeautiful thought; she has capacity for enjoyment, but the delicacy of the nostril indicates equal sensibility to pain." Men agreed that she possessed a sense of humour, and could see a joke against herself. Perhaps the greatest charm of the face was its immaturity and youthfulness. It might become really beautiful; it might, as easily, degenerate into chocolate-box prettiness.

Harry, usually of a sanguine complexion, looked rather pallid. Our *preux chevalier* had kept vigils, as befitted one about to embark upon a notable enterprise, exacting sacrifice and self-denial. Esther shook hands.

"I got your letter," said Harry.

She divined that he disapproved of the stage.

"Letters are not like foolish young women, they seldom go astray."

This was flippant; and Harry frowned. After much thought and consultation with his friends, he had nerved himself for the great plunge. Poised for the leap, it was intolerable that Esther should make silly remarks.

"You mean to become an actress?"

"I mean to earn my living."

"If you can."

"If I can."

"Suppose you can't?"

"It's my duty to try."

"And it's my duty to prevent you. I see that clearly. I didn't sleep a wink last night. I want to do the right thing, but it's not always certain just what the right thing is."

So speaking, he possessed himself of her hand. Esther knew what was coming, and rejoiced. Harry was about to justify her feeling for him by doing something rash. The blood flew to her cheeks.

"I'm going to look after you," he whispered, and then he kissed her hand. Not an ardent wooing, according to the standard set by Romeo, but one must admit that our Harry was handicapped. Conscious of the censure of a devoted mother, he presented himself as a burnt offering upon the altar of duty. As a spectacle he would have been supremely ridiculous had he not loved Esther. This love, in its essence, was the highest emotion of which he was capable. For the moment it transmuted a pleasure-seeking egotist into something approximating to a man.

"Thank you," said Esther.

Her hand trembled. Instantly, Harry kissed her, holding her to him, and triumphant. Duty slipped out of sight. He was astounded to think that he had restrained himself so long. And her seemingly unconditional surrender set him ablaze: balsam poured upon the flames! She loved him! Her heart beat beneath

his! The joy that cannot speak thrilled upon her sweet lips. So Cophetua kissed his beggar-maid, and forgot—let us hope—that he was a king.

When he released her, she sank panting upon the primrose satin ottoman. She panted like a hunted animal too hardly pressed. Harry knelt down and laid his curly head in her lap. Her hands fell upon it, but her eyes were upturned. Then, in her soft voice, she said slowly: "Dear Harry, I love you, and you love me, but I cannot marry you, or allow you to take care of me."

When he looked up confounded, she smiled, and, bending her own head, kissed him between the eyes.

"I shall marry you at once," he said, with finality.

Esther shook her head.

"You have asked me; that is enough."

"It's not enough for me," he protested.

"You have given me back my self-respect. Oh, Harry, I was miserable because you didn't ask me. Now it's all right. I can stand anything."

"We must be married at once," he repeated.

"In defiance of your mother?"

"I'd have spoken before if it hadn't been for her. The little Mater will come round, you'll see."

"She did come round this afternoon," said Esther.

"She didn't make herself—er—nasty?"

"She couldn't."

"You refuse to marry me because of something she said?"

"No; I refuse to marry you because I won't be a burden on the man I love."

"My own girl! What nonsense you talk."

"Sense or nonsense, I say what I mean."

"You are really serious?"

"To my inmost core."

A warm discussion followed, unnecessary to record. Harry became platitudinous and prosy, and finally rude. Esther repressed her temper (she had one), and used soft answers. The *preux chevalier* realised that he was being flouted and set at nought. He had come hither prepared to play the paladin, and to ride away with his true love behind him. And lo! his true love reversed their parts. She, single-handed, proposed to engage in a fight *à outrance* against poverty. Can we blame him that he forgot his manners?

Next day Esther happened to call upon Dorothea. Coming out of the Park she saw Dorothea step from her carriage and enter the house. The butler, however, said "Not at home." No doubt Esther should have insisted. She would have done so a fortnight before, refusing to believe that a friend was not welcome in or out of season. Now she went away, not exactly aggrieved, but with the feeling that the Fates were on the side of Mrs. Grundy. Dorothea, who had a splitting headache, never heard of this call. Esther, therefore, received no explanatory note. She told herself that Dorothea meant to drop her.

Meanwhile Harry was persecuting her chivalrously. We may take his word for it that he was unhappy; and he made Esther unhappy. He bought an engagement ring which she refused to accept. He swore by the gods that he would hurl it into the Serpentine, but

he didn't. He recited, interminably, arguments against gently nurtured maidens leaving their bowers. Bayard or Gaston de Foix may have so talked to their sisters. Esther laughed, not very joyously, and assured the *preux chevalier* that he was mediæval, or at least early Victorian. Finally, he delivered an ultimatum: "If she went on the stage, all was over."

That evening she wrote to Henry FitzRoy and asked him for five minutes of his valuable time.

CHAPTER III

WE MOVE AMONGST MUMMERS

HENRY FITZROY was beloved by half the women in England. Indeed, enthusiastic young ladies constituted an order, the independent order of the K. O. H. The capitals stood for "Keen on Henry," or "Keen Order of Henryites." Members wore a pretty badge with the mystic letters intertwined in a cipher encircled by the motto One and Only, executed in blue and white enamel. Lest respectable, old-fashioned folk should be unduly shocked, let us hasten to add that these devoted maidens worshipped at a distance. The glamour of the footlights lay between them and their god. The existence of the order is recorded merely to indicate a personality and to give the lie direct to those who assert that integrity, altruism, and untarnished honour are moribund in this kingdom. Henry inspired ardours in Upper Tooting and even in Sauchiehall Street because he was good and unselfish and noble, always the perfect gentleman. His manners were as carefully creased as his trousers; his language as discreetly selected as his cravats. When he left the stage, which was seldom, maiden aunts nudged each other and whispered, "That is what I call a—Man!"

Esther saw him between the third and fourth acts of a play which had been running for nearly a year. She went to the theatre alone, going first to the box

office and thence to the stage door, where the janitor stared curiously at her black clothes and white face.

She was ushered into a comfortably furnished sitting-room. The curtains between it and a dressing-room were not drawn, so Esther was able to see a brilliantly lighted table covered with the usual articles of make-up, and on the walls different costumes ready to the hand of the dresser.

Esther sat down in the sitting-room, and the dresser, after a careful scrutiny, drew the curtains. Esther examined the different portraits of FitzRoy, delicately framed and mounted. What a number of parts he had played! And how amazingly he preserved his own identity, never merged in that of his part! He remained the One and Only. In a drawing-room nobody had ever been known to mistake him for Jones or Robinson. Railway porters, who had not seen him on the stage, touched their hats to him, because, having access to the illustrated papers, they recognised at once his finely cut features and penetrating glance. Every schoolgirl knew that his teeth were white because he used Bodol.

He came in two minutes later, warm but slightly frigid in manner, although very polite. He regretted that he had kept Miss Yorke waiting, but he was now at her service for *ten* minutes. The emphasis on the numeral served to remind Esther that she had asked for five.

"If a man asks for five pounds do you give him ten?" she said.

Without waiting for his answer, she explained her

errand. FitzRoy listened, leaning his square chin upon his hand and giving careful attention to her voice and face. When she had finished he murmured:

"You have had no experience?"

"Only as an amateur."

"And you ask for my advice?"

She nodded, smiling nervously. FitzRoy began to speak in the monotone so effective on the stage, because it indicates commonsense, proportion, justice, good breeding—qualities highly esteemed by the stalls and dress circle. He spoke as a bishop might speak at his club, not didactically, but with authority, conveying the conviction of knowledge and experience suppressed. Even in moments of passion the critics were of opinion that Henry had "something up his sleeve."

"You are young, keen, clever, and you say you must earn your living. Try to earn it anywhere except in a theatre."

"Oh, Mr. FitzRoy!"

"If I had a daughter I should say the same thing to her. Do you know that mine is the only profession out of which the leading men and women try to keep their own girls? Isn't that fact significant?"

"But the girls go on all the same."

"True. Well, Miss Yorke, I can give you a line to Johnson, who will, perhaps, take you as a pupil. After a year or two with him come back to me."

"But Mr. Johnson never appears in London?"

"Never! His pupils do. Then there is Miss Jagg,

the sister of Charles and Laura Jagg. She has a dramatic academy just round the corner. My card will do for Miranda. Choose—letter or card? Or shall we say both?"

"You are very kind."

"On the contrary, I'm aiding and abetting a misdemeanour. There! Good-night and good luck!"

She found herself at the stage door, with a breeze from the river cooling her hot cheeks. The night was fine, so she decided to walk home. How Harry would fume if he knew! And yet, sooner or later, she must learn to walk alone through London streets. She started, chin in air, looking neither to right nor left. Within a couple of minutes she had reached Piccadilly Circus.

So far her progress had been swift and free, because she had approached the great thoroughfare from side streets. Now she was constrained to move slowly and with caution. Crossing the Circus a policeman held up his hand. She and those about her stood still while carriages and cabs rolled swiftly by. Scores of times she had glanced from her father's brougham and seen kaleidoscopically the variegated, patient crowd, the blur of colour and form which she knew to be the human tide arrested for a moment by the uplifted hand of the law, but soon to flow on, resistless and omnipotent, percolating everywhere, solid and fluid, abstract and concrete, good and evil.

To-night she realised that she belonged to the crowd, was in it and of it. She seemed to have stepped from a hilltop to the plain, from the select few to the undis-

tinguished many; and for the moment she lost the sense of identity. Beside her stood a girl about her own age, pretty, graceful, but unmistakably belonging to the class described by police-court reporters as "unfortunate." She eyed Esther with curiosity. Then she said pleasantly, "Nice night, isn't it?" Esther blushed to the roots of her hair. The tone, the glance, implied equality.

"Yes, it's very fine," she stammered. The girl started, and beneath the paint Esther saw the blood flow swiftly to her chin and temples.

"I beg your pardon," she said nervously. "I d-didn't know; I'm very sorry."

Esther touched the other's arm.

"Don't!" she said quickly. "Why should you be sorry? Why shouldn't you speak to me?"

The policeman lowered his hand; the crowd swept on; Esther lost sight of her companion.

She stood still for an instant, and perceived that a man was approaching her. She felt her knees tremble; a lump formed itself in her throat. If this man spoke to her, she might faint, or scream, or do something incredibly silly. Her eyes met his appealingly, and yet he came on, like a sort of Juggernaut.

"Are you ill? Can I help you?"

He raised his hat.

"If you would call a hansom," she faltered.

As the hansom drew up he said, "I am a doctor; I thought you were going to faint."

"I felt faint," Esther answered, "but I'm all right now. Will you kindly tell the man to drive me to

Palace Gardens?" The doctor looked astounded, but obeyed. He lifted his hat for the second time as the hansom began to move, and Esther was left with a vivid impression of a thin, pale, clean-shaven face, keen blue eyes, and a broad, dominating forehead. She lay back against the cushions.

Upon the following morning, at half-past ten, she called upon Miranda Jagg. Miranda—everybody called her Miranda—received her in a faded pink dressing-gown. She wore green carpet slippers and spectacles. Through these beamed a pair of bright, quizzical eyes. Esther presented the One and Only's card.

"Did Henry say anything about my terms?"

"Not a word, Miss Jagg."

"They vary. You're a swell, eh?"

"Nothing of the sort."

"But you've money——" Her sharp eyes appraised every article of clothing.

"I'm nearly penniless. I'm the daughter of—of Mr. Douglas Yorke."

"My dear, I never heard of him. I'm the most ignorant woman in the world. I can act, and I can teach the right sort how to act. I never read anything but theatrical news."

"I hope you'll find me the right sort."

"Haven't said I'll take you yet. I'm particular—always was. The grandchild of Charles James Bean has a right to be."

"You are Charles Bean's grandchild?"

"Didn't you know? And once I played Juliet. Ah —ha! And my last part was the Nurse. I walked all round 'em! I'm a better actress than my sister Laura, but she has kept her figure."

She winked her eye, and held out a pretty dimpled hand.

"Nothing left but that," she added.

"I do hope you'll take me."

"Sit down," said Miss Jagg trenchantly. Esther did so. "I'll take you," said this remarkable woman. "You can sit down properly; I shan't have to teach you that; and you've a decent voice and you put your clothes on properly. But, Lord bless you! thousands can do that. Can't sing or dance, eh?"

"No."

"Just as well. You might be tempted to go for musical comedy. Want to begin at once, eh?"

"Please."

"You're always in a hurry," grumbled Miranda.

"And your terms, Miss Jagg?"

"We'll talk about that this day week. If you shape well—— Don't worry about the cash part! If you mean biz that'll be all right."

"I do mean biz," Esther replied valiantly.

"Some of 'em will be here at eleven. You can watch us at work if you like. See if you can spot the promising ones. Have a cig?"

"No, thanks," said Esther politely.

Miranda lighted a cigarette and began to talk volubly of past triumphs. This was her weakness.

"If you had seen me as Olivia—— But I shone

brightest in Shakespeare. Portia, Beatrice, Kate the Shrew, Lady Macbeth, Ophelia—I've played 'em all, my dear. Don't make any mistake, the lot you know can't act as we did. Most of 'em ain't fit to carry a flag in a pantomime. And think of our training! Lawsy! didn't we work, too. I've rehearsed for ten hours at a stretch. Do you admire my brother Charles very much?"

She never stopped talking about herself and her illustrious family till her pupils had begun to arrive.

Work—as the pupils called it—lasted for two hours. Miranda held Esther spellbound. Gestures, voice, expression, were inimitable. The pupils being unable to mimic her, she mimicked them, but so delicately, with such irresistible drollery, that none took offence. One girl, older than the others, was praised and exalted as an example. Esther noticed her, because she had a beautiful face upon which suffering was writ large. Everybody addressed her as Miss Lovell, and not till afterwards did Esther discover that her Christian name was Sabrina. Thrice Miranda appealed directly to her: "How does that strike you, Miss Lovell?" or, "Could you improve that pose?" Sabrina answered in an emotionless voice, but with real critical ability, and each time Miranda nodded, exclaiming: "Yes, yes, yes—you are quite right!" After two hours the others hurried off, but Sabrina remained to be introduced to Esther. Miranda said, "Miss Yorke wants to become an actress. Do talk to her, and tell her about yourself. It's a black-and-white sketch she'll give you," she added, turning to Esther and showing

a row of magnificent teeth in a broad genial smile. "What did you think of my 'star' class?"

"You frightened me more than you frightened them, Miss Jagg."

"I shall go easy with you, my dear. They're actors and actresses—at least that's what they call themselves."

"You have played in public?" said Esther to Sabrina.

"For more than five years."

"I'm off for my chop and pint of stout," declared Miranda. "Come again at four, Miss Yorke, and see the duffers. Ta, ta!"

She whirled out of the room.

"Will you lunch with me?" said Sabrina gravely. "I belong to a small women's club near here." Esther smiled and accepted, murmuring:

"Does Miss Jagg lunch out in a pink dressing-gown and carpet slippers?"

Sabrina explained. Miranda lived in three little rooms above the large room where she held her classes.

"She hardly ever goes out," Sabrina added. "We give her all the exercise she needs, and when she wants fresh air she sits by an open window."

The girls walked through Covent Garden into King Street. Sabrina led the way into one of the old Georgian houses, where her club had lately installed itself. A simple lunch was ordered and consumed. Coffee followed. Then Sabrina said abruptly, "Why are you going on the stage?" When some of the reasons were given, she nodded reflectively, but said nothing.

Esther, in her turn, asked, "Why do you take lessons from Miss Jagg?"

"Because she can teach me a lot and because she may get me a London engagement."

"You have never had a London engagement?"

"Never. You look surprised."

"But you act so well, you——"

"Please go on! Tell me all the nice things you are thinking about me. I like you already, but I shall like you twice as much if you tell me I'm clever and——"

She paused, smiling. Esther promptly filled in the word "beautiful."

"I was beautiful," Sabrina said seriously. "Three years at fifteen shillings a week have printed some ugly lines on my face."

"Fifteen shillings!" Esther gasped.

"I was with Johnson, serving my apprenticeship. I don't complain; I learned a lot. When I left him, and went on my own, I nearly starved. Now I'm rich. I've one hundred and fifty pounds a year of my own—three pounds a week for ever and ever. I hope you have at least that." She glanced at Esther's dress. "What a silly question! You spend twice as much on your frocks."

"I have five hundred pounds," replied Esther slowly, "a lot of clothes which I can't wear because I'm, as you see, in deep mourning, some jewellery, and a little furniture."

"Oh!" said Sabrina.

Esther did not add (because she did not know) that

the five hundred pounds had been subscribed for her by her father's creditors. It was a small sum, but considering the unhappy difference between the late banker's assets and liabilities not an ungenerous one.

"But you must have heaps of friends, Miss Yorke?"

Esther considered, answering deliberately:

"I'm cutting loose. Some have been very kind. Could I accept their hospitality and reject their advice?"

Sabrina laughed.

"You could, but you're the sort that wouldn't. Of course they advised you to keep off the boards? Sound advice, too. Well, I cut loose from a country parsonage. Waiter! The bill!"

This was the beginning of a friendship destined to mean much to Esther. It ripened slowly. Perhaps on each side there was the apprehension that disappointment might be lurking behind every milestone on the road. Dorothea Treherne had left London without meeting Esther again. She had called, but Esther, convinced—and not unreasonably—that a scene was impending, had returned a Roland for an Oliver. Mrs. Treherne was informed that Miss Yorke was "not at home," and so two women who might have been a joy and solace to each other were driven apart by the irony of circumstance.

The season being at an end, Lady Matilda had begun her annual round of visits. She was at Cowes, and Harry was at Ostend. He had felt that he must put the deep blue sea between himself and this obstinate, headstrong creature whom he adored. At the

time, therefore, when Esther removed from Palace Gardens to Bloomsbury, neither Harry nor his sister was in town. Sabrina, fortunately, had a large experience of landladies and a genius for economy. Esther, on the other hand, had a genius as marked for expenditure: her extravagance horrified the girl who had lived on fifteen shillings a week.

We must record a scene between the lovers upon the eve of Harry's departure for Ostend. It might have been so charming and romantic; it turned out so much the reverse. All the blame cannot be laid on the man. The *rôle* of mouse was forced upon him, and you must never forget that ugly twins stood between him and forty thousand a year. When he left Eton he had reason to believe that he might aspire to a Lord Lieutenancy at least; the office was hereditary in the Rye family. Gazing at himself through a magnifying glass, beholding with complacency a figure of heroic size, the assurance of the editor of the popular sporting magazine was not needed to emphasise the admitted fact that he looked "One of the Best."

Behold him on his knees before a chit of twenty!

Of course he wanted her. The soft touch of her lips had driven prudence to Timbuctoo. He wanted her—at once. Special licences loomed in his mind. To make a Gretna Green affair of it would have been unadulterated bliss.

And she, the heartless creature, darkened his day by prattling inconsequently of—to-morrow. She hurled at him some saw out of the philosophies: "Happiness must be earned to be enjoyed," a lie on the face

of it. Who so happy as children? He wanted to play Paul to her Virginia, to wander hand in hand with her upon the shores of Quiberon's "sickle-shaped bay," or some other not too remote strand unfrequented by the ubiquitous tripper.

And afterwards?

She put the question brutally with derisive laughter, and he could never face it—like a paladin. Instead, he evaded it, slinking past the inevitable, actually blushing when she brazenly presented the possibility of children.

But the main issue remained the stage. He heard of the visit to FitzRoy, but not of the walk from St. Martin's Lane to Piccadilly Circus; and he had to smile at Esther's description of Miranda Jagg, turning up his nose at the pink dressing-gown and carpet slippers.

"If you had heard her with the star class——"

"I don't want to hear her. That you should mix with such people makes me miserable. And I'm astounded that you should have gone alone to see FitzRoy. I told you that would be the last straw."

"You did. Why are you here to-day? A man of your inches should never threaten what he does not intend to perform."

"I intended to cut loose, but you're a witch. If I let you try this ridiculous experiment, will you marry me in three months?"

She hesitated.

"Perhaps," she said gently, "but not till I've justi-

fied existence by earning my own bread and butter. Meantime, you are free and I am free."

"I don't want to be free."

"I know you, Harry, and I know myself. Perhaps I know you better than I know myself, because I have never lived with antimacassars and Berlin wool-work. They are conspicuous in my new lodging, and they are sure to change my point of view."

"And heaps of people want you."

"For week-end visits."

He went away grumbling, although they kissed at parting. When he had gone Esther sat frowning and thinking for nearly an hour. Why had this gallant lover shrunk in Cupid's washing? Perhaps offence lay in the humiliating inference that he was enamoured desperately of her body, while he expressed distrust if not contempt of her intelligence. Instinct told her that Harry Rye would be hard to live with if he discovered that his wife was cleverer than himself.

The conviction stole upon her that she, even as he, had fallen in love with the envelope without waiting to study the document within. His good looks, his pleasant voice, his easy manner, had captivated her. He had that "little way" with women which counts for so much. Once she had asked her father what he thought of the young fellow. Mr. Yorke had replied drily that he was "decorative."

Thinking of Harry, another face formed itself in her mind—the face of the doctor who had accosted her in Piccadilly Circus. The incident refused to be banished from memory. She had been weak, abominably

weak, at a moment when she should have been strong. And her weakness, not her beauty, such as it was, had appealed to a kindly man. Why had she felt faint? Did the sense of physical incapacity to rise to an emergency foreshadow horrors in the future? Her father, man of iron as she had deemed him to be, had failed in a supreme moment, because he was tired. And that word solved her riddle. Alone in the tremendous crowd, subject to its irresistible force, she had realised her own helplessness. Something more than words had passed between her and the waif of the pavement. If they never met again, they were linked together, because in this unhappy creature Esther recognised a debased resemblance to herself. She knew that the girl had had sunny hours; she knew that the storm must have come suddenly, drenching her to the skin before she was aware of it, deafening her with its thunders, blinding her with its lightning. At the moment when she was engulfed by the crowd she had flung Esther a pathetic smile, half grateful, half derisive. The smile had seemed to say, "I know what you are because I remember what I was. I might be you; you might be me."

And the truth made Esther sick and dizzy.

CHAPTER IV

IN BLOOMSBURY

BLOOMSBURY received her and her pretty things in the middle of August. Sabrina had discovered, not without difficulty, two nice rooms in a dingy street within a stone's throw of Mecklenburg Square. One of the rooms was glorified by a genuine Adams chimney-piece upon which stood a frightful ormulu clock under a glass shade and two Bohemian glass vases rising out of mats of purple and green Berlin wool-work. Antimacassars abounded.

The installation had its humours.

Sabrina, from the first, opposed the taking of two rooms. And she tried, quite in vain, to persuade Esther to sell her Sheraton bookcase and other "meubles" of not inconsiderable value.

"I must keep something to remind me of the fat years."

"That is where you are so unwise. You ought to sell everything, I mean *everything*, invest the whole of it, and live on the income."

"Live on a pound a week?"

"Certainly."

"I couldn't."

"Millions have to do it."

Esther made a grimace, and Sabrina laughed, shrugging her shoulders. Already she divined obstinacy in

this new friend and the determination to go free. Mrs. Willet, the landlady, removed the antimacassars and wool-work and most of her furniture, not, however, without protest and affirmation of respectability. Miss Yorke, so she told her husband, was quite the lady; but she looked at Sabrina with wide-eyed interrogation. "A play-actress! That's what they called 'emselves!" Sabrina, it is true, had introduced Esther, who seemed to have come to stay; but Sabrina also had lowered the rent of the rooms to the irreducible minimum.

"I can't sleep when I think of that," Mrs. Willet said to Willet.

Within a week two long boxes filled with scarlet geraniums adorned the second floor front. Number 11 became conspicuous in the dingy street.

"Who pays?" asked Willet.

"She does—cash on the nail for everything. You don't suppose——?"

"Never saw a Jill like this without her Jack," said Willet.

"I'll have no Jacks, nor Toms either, taking away the character of my house," declared Mrs. Willet.

"What you've got to do," said the cautious Willet, "is to see that the rent's paid. If Jack drops in to tea it is none o' your business."

"I say nothing against tea, Willet. But if any young man drops in to supper, why, I'll drop on to him. I'm not a whited sepulchre like others in this street."

Nobody came to tea or supper except Sabrina.

A month passed before Sabrina heard of Harry. Indeed, all mention of our paladin might have been suppressed had he not written a letter in which, for the fifth and last time, he proposed marriage.

"I have reason to believe" (he wrote) "that my uncle might increase my allowance. The twins have not had even measles, and they tell me babies die like flies in the dog-days. But I want your authority to write to Camber, and lay the facts before him. He's not a bad sort, and he must feel rather cheap when he thinks of me. He was fifty-eight when he married that designing woman!

"I've had no fun here because of your obstinacy. It drives me wild to think of your stewing in Bloomsbury when we might be together listening to a ripping band. I suppose you're living on buns and milk. Anyway, I want to tell Camber that we are engaged and going to get married at once. Then he can do the square thing if he means to behave decently. It might burke the affair to make our marriage provisional on his doubling my allowance, because it wouldn't surprise me a little bit if the Mater had got at him. They met at Cowes, where people have absolutely nothing to do except to prattle about other people's business.

"And now, at the risk of your calling me a beast, I'm going to say frankly that if you say 'No,' I shall take it that things are at an end between us. I want you as you are, dearest, not as you will be three years hence if you *do* succeed, which you admit is doubtful.

Why rub off the bloom scrimmaging about with these confounded mummers?"

A postscript followed:

"I've lost a stone over this job."

The postscript nearly melted Esther. Her Harry thin and pale, wandering alone upon the sands of Ostend, brought tears to the heart if not to the eyes. And his letter came pat to a moment when the excitement of a great change had died a natural death. For several days Miranda had been sharper in word and manner. Slowly but unmistakably our heroine was beginning to grasp the fundamental difference between the gifted amateur and the professional, and to see clearly the nature of the road which she had elected to travel; a road lined with despairing ranks of unemployed. Sabrina, with her undoubted talent, remained without an autumn engagement. She wrote innumerable letters to dramatists and actor-managers, she advertised in the *Era*, she wore out shoe-leather flitting from agency to agency, but she was not wanted.

By this time Esther had learned to admire in Sabrina qualities lacking in herself. Sabrina's commonsense cooled not unpleasantly perfervid sensibilities. Esther herself, not infelicitously, called this "taking a dip in the Severn." But she had never plunged to the depths. Each girl had little more than a surface knowledge of the other.

"Miranda has been awfully cross lately. What am I to infer from that?"

"She will drink stout when the thermometer is seventy in the shade."

"Sabrina—she thinks me a duffer."

"So you are."

"A *hopeless* duffer."

"Are you fishing? You've not done badly."

"I read 'chuck it!' in her funny little beady eyes."

"Well, if anything else turned up, I'd say 'chuck it,' too."

"Something has turned up. A man wants to marry me. I've said 'no' four times."

Esther poured out the story curled up at ease on her divan amongst the big soft cushions. Sabrina sat bolt upright in a straight-backed chair.

"Why have you told me this?"

"I want your advice."

"I don't believe it. You want my experience. I don't see why I should give it to you. I never asked for your confidence. I have been afraid of this. Perhaps we're going too fast. I like you. I like you better every time we meet, but can I trust you? Why do you trust me?"

She shot the question at Esther.

"How funny you are!"

"Funny?" Sabrina scowled. "What an idiotic expression! You raise a tremendous issue. I say tremendous, because it is so to me. It may not be so to you. Why should you trust me? We have known each other a few weeks."

"I wanted to tell you the first day we met."

"Thank the Lord you didn't! I dislike women who

gush without encouragement. And yet I like you. I believe I could love you. And, for my life, I can't analyse the why and wherefore."

"Why should you? It's instinct."

"Perhaps. But I'm afraid of my instinct."

"I have asked no confidence from you."

"Pouf-f-f! A cutlet for a cutlet is imperative. You have, in a sense, forced my hand, and yet I'm not indignant. That's what surprises me."

Esther laughed, rolled off her cushions, stood up, and then, bending suddenly, kissed Sabrina affectionately.

"Whether you like me or not, I love you."

Sabrina did not return the salute, but she grumbled out: "I suppose that settles it. Now, don't scream, and don't say anything ridiculous; I'm a married woman."

"Sabrina!"

"Let us be perfectly calm. I'm a married woman, and I don't live with my husband, who is a respectable person. He allows me one hundred and fifty a year."

"Gracious!"

"I would sooner you took this lying down. Please climb back on to your cushions. I married to escape from the slavery of fifteen shillings a week. I didn't love my husband, and he knew it. Fortunately he is a golfer. I can't account for it, but to some men that game offers perfectly astounding compensations. The week before a competition I told my husband that we had been idiots to marry. He was furious. He said that I'd wrecked his chance. My dear, I can only

conclude that it gave him the fillip he needed. He played the game of his life, and his handicap was lowered to five. It is now, I believe, three, and by giving his mashie undivided attention he may get down to scratch. He won three events, and he was so delighted that he consented to our separation. He is perfectly happy—and so am I."

"Did he l-love you?"

"He thought he did."

Harry's letter was produced and a photograph—the same which stood upon Lady Matilda's baby-grand piano, and which provoked maternal superlatives. Sabrina looked at it critically, with a vertical line between her delicate brows, and her lower lip pressing full upon the arch of the upper.

"He is very handsome."

"Yes."

"I suppose that appealed enormously to you. It would to me. My poor Tom was not beautiful." She went on, staring at the photograph as if striving to pierce beneath the crust, while a few phrases dropped upon the silence.

"You promised his mother, but promises at the point of the pistol are not binding. What some excellent persons call honour has never tyrannised over me. At least not since I left Tom. And Mr. Rye has seven hundred a year, and——"

"His debts."

"I was going to say the hope, the probability, of an increased allowance from Lord Camber, who I've been told is rich beyond dreams of avarice; but the

avarice may be there all the same. It wouldn't be prudent to assume the increase of allowance."

"I don't."

"Quite right! Then the twins may perish. Your Harry alluded to dog-days."

"It was horrid of him."

"It proves that he has a sanguine temperament. What he says of scrimmaging about with mummers is so true. The bloom will fade from his dearest in Bloomsbury."

"You are laughing at him and me?"

"God forbid!"

"You don't like him?"

"Wrong again. I like him because he is so—guileless, and, unconsciously, such a humorist. If you marry him he will amuse you."

"You say that gravely, as if it were really an inducement."

"If you had known my poor Tom! Well, I detest giving an opinion upon anything as vital as this, but you expect it. Mr. Rye is not clever. Therefore you may do something with him if you exercise extraordinary tact. He must be kept up to the mark. He mustn't play the hero intermittently. Why do you wriggle?"

"I can't help it; you present him in motley."

"The West End tailors will tell you it's the common wear, but don't let him find it out. Of course you'll marry him."

"I shall not marry him," said Esther slowly.

"You won't be able to stand this life. Don't mis-

take me! You may learn to live on lentils and like them, but disappointment will crush you."

The word came out harshly; the lines in the speaker's face deepened.

"I can't marry him."

"You mean you don't love him."

"I mean—oh! it's hard to explain. I did love him. And there are moments now—— But I seem to see him with different eyes. I have become critical."

"Exit Cupid, weeping."

"Yes. And yet——" She sighed, faintly blushing, remembering how she had felt when she lay in his arms.

"Are there two Esther Yorkes?"

"Half a dozen!"

"Then, as the daughter of a clergyman of the Church of England, I forbid the banns. Henry Rye must not be encouraged to commit polygamy."

"If you would be really serious."

"But I am serious, more serious than you are or can be." Her charming voice, with its many inflections, deepened and became impressive. "And, as you wish it, I shall speak plainly, and I daresay you will be furious. This young man has been making love to you for years. You know it, he knows it, and other men know it. I'll bet a new hat you have had no proposals."

"Not one."

"He stuck a sign upon you: 'Private property. Trespassers will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law!'"

"I had never thought of it in that way."

"He played cricket for the Gentlemen of England. What a fine phrase—the Gentlemen of England! But he didn't play cricket with you. Don't look indignant! He wanted to be free to amuse himself. When the time came he knew you would be there, a nice, dimpled little dear, ready to fall into his arms when he opened them."

"But he did ask me. Is he selfish now?"

"Yes," said Sabrina deliberately. "He is thinking of the bloom on the peach."

"Why shouldn't he?"

Sabrina shrugged her shoulders. Esther continued vehemently:

"If he really wants me——"

"Oh! He wants you. He is the hart royal, heated in the chase, and you—the cooling stream."

"I don't feel particularly cool."

"When he has slaked his thirst, what then? Can you face that question fearlessly? Most girls have not the pluck, nor the brains, nor the experience. I am talking plainly, Esther. If some friend had talked as plainly to me, Tom might not have begun to play golf on his honeymoon. My dear, if you expect to find in a husband the great things—fidelity, sympathy, and unselfishness, don't marry this man!"

"I have said that I shall not marry him."

"True, but you are one of those delightful creatures who are governed by impulse instead of reason. Now let me show the other side. Your Harry has seven hundred a year, and more to come. With his

upbringing and yours seven hundred a year means pinching, but it does not mean—starvation."

The grim word fell like a blow.

"Starvation?"

"I have starved. I have felt so hungry that I could have stolen a crust from a dog or a child. I have been tempted, atrociously tempted, to sell the only thing that was left me for a mess of pottage." She laughed drearily. "If Esau suffered half the pangs that have torn me I do not blame him. Well, I worried through because I am stronger than most. Will you worry through?"

Esther's tears were falling on the silken cushions.

"I do not know," she faltered. Sabrina continued in a softer tone:

"Marry this man with your eyes open, and you will be fairly comfortable, fairly secure. Because he trifled with you when you were rich, you have the right to marry him now that you are poor. I am clear on that point."

"I shall not marry him."

"Amen. I dare not say Hallelujah!"

Next day Esther wrote to Harry:

I cannot marry you. Perhaps the bloom has been rubbed off already. Life seems very different. And because the present is dull and drab, one thinks more and more of the future. With you, or without you, I am terrified of the future. Goodbye.

Harry received this letter as he was sipping his morning coffee upon the terrace of a splendid hotel

overlooking the sea. He told himself that he was the most miserable man in Ostend, and the most unlucky. Only the night before, at the Cercle Privé, he had lost a (for him) not inconsiderable sum at baccarat, and, accordingly, had fortified himself with the reflection that his love affairs must be mending. Had a man ever been known to be unlucky in love and cards simultaneously?

But he had done the real right thing.

For the moment he slips from our sight. It will never be known what Lady Matilda said to Lord Camber at Cowes, but Harry had the good fortune to secure a billet at The Hague, and together with this a pleasant letter from his uncle, saying that his allowance would be increased, and that in the event of his marrying a suitable young lady proper settlements might be made. The word "suitable" may be explained by a letter from Lady Matilda, which we present unmutilated:

My dearest Boy,—Captain Saladin, whom I met at Cowes—he is one of the oldest members of the Squadron, and very kind, although they do call him the Old Curiosity Shop—seems to have known Douglas Yorke very intimately five-and-twenty years ago. Captain Saladin tells me, in the strictest confidence, that there was a certain scandal about Mrs. Yorke. Nobody knew anything about her. Of course her death soon after poor dear Esther's birth silenced all tongues. But Captain Saladin is quite sure that Douglas Yorke was *not* legally married to her. This has been a terrible shock, for you know how very dear Esther was—*and is*—to me. It is curious that in the books of reference which I have dipped into there is no mention of any marriage. In these cases one *must* infer the worst.

Have you seen my picture in the current number of 'Butter-

flies'? *I am on the front page.* The likeness is excellent, but underneath is written: *One of our Titled Breeders of Poultry.* The editor, silly fellow! confounded me with that fright Matilda Wyandotte whose photograph appears in the middle of the paper with *my* name under it. This has annoyed me very much, for the Grand Duke Ivan, who ought to know better, will sing before me a vulgar song about cocks crowing and everybody knowing that there'll be eggs for breakfast in the morning! ! ! And last night, dining on the royal yacht, I found an egg in my napkin. The Prince was unkind enough to roar with laughter.

Always your loving

MOTHER.

P.S.—I do see the finger of Providence in all this.

M.R.

P.P.S.—Your uncle has been *most* civil. It is so odd to reflect that he might have married little me if your father hadn't turned up. *Ça donne furieusement à penser!*

P.P.P.S.—Of course poor dear Esther knows nothing of this sad story, and must never know. Many kisses.

MUMMIE.

CHAPTER V

CONTAINS A COMMUNICATION

MIRANDA prided herself on telling the truth. Managers, appreciating this rare virtue, often came to her in hours of need and engaged pupils with no recommendation other than Miss Jagg's assurance that they were not "sticks." Greater praise she bestowed on few. The "sticks," moreover, never lingered long with her, unless they had more money than pride. After a couple of months she would say, with a smile that took some of the sting out of her words: "My dear, you are no good; you can't act for nuts, and I can't make you act. Chuck it! If you won't chuck it, I must double my terms. There you are!"

Sometimes the sacred fire burned so strongly that they stayed on—at double fees!

Before September was over Miranda asked Esther to share a steak and a quart of stout. If you lunched with Miss Jagg you ate and drank what she ate and drank—or went without. After the cheese Miranda always made the coffee; and after the coffee she would speak with even greater frankness and volubility than usual.

"I wish I could turn you into a great actress," she told Esther, as she lit a cigarette, "but I can't. You are no better and no worse than nine-tenths of the girls who come to me. With luck you may get an

engagement as understudy, and later, when your looks go, you may be cast for third-rate parts. Nothing more can be expected; and so I say chuck it! Try something else. Don't waste time and money knocking at doors which, believe me, won't open wide for you."

"Thanks," said Esther.

"Thank *you* for not howling. Tears make me furious; and, look here, have no regrets. It's a beast of a profession. I love it—yes, because I was born and bred in it; but it tears the heart out of one. Look at Sabrina Lovell! With half a chance she'd earn her forty guineas a week, but chance won't come her way."

"What can I do?"

"My dear, go back to your friends, wear some smart black and white frocks, marry a nice kind man."

"Mention something else."

"You might start a hat shop, or a dressmaking establishment."

"Establishment!"

"Two girls who came to me, both sticks, are doing well with a bookstall. They started in one tiny room on next to nothing. Another woman, who played leading parts in the provinces, now makes sandwiches and cakes somewhere in Battersea. There are ways for girls without means, but they are hard to find."

"I hate saying good-bye," said Esther.

"Why good-bye? You will come and see me. We shall remain friends. If you decide to trim hats I shall send some heads to you. Talk it over with Sabrina Lovell."

To Esther's surprise Sabrina thought well of the hat shop.

"It's largely a matter of *clientèle*," she observed. "You must knows heaps of people; and you've excellent taste. You would buy some really good models in Paris and get the shapes copied over here. You would have to pay a top wage to a first-class trimmer."

"I must think it over."

"If I were to go in with you——?"

"Sabrina!"

"I'm sick of doing nothing. You've five hundred pounds and I've one hundred and fifty pounds a year for ever and ever. Together we can't starve."

"You are always using that word 'starve'"

"I'm branded with it."

"I should be afraid of nothing with you as a partner."

"We'll think this over."

"Books would be more interesting."

"I'm sure there's no money in bookselling, but I'll find out."

Next day Sabrina consulted a friend who was at once author, publisher, and bookseller. His report was not encouraging.

"I don't know," said he, "which is the greater fool, the man who writes books or the man who sells books."

"People can do so easily without books, but they must wear hats," said Sabrina.

That night they spent two hours staring at a map of London, and considering the respective claims of

different localities. For a week they walked about Mayfair, peering into hat-shop windows.

"The profits must be enormous," said Esther.

"Um," replied Sabrina.

They began to scan the advertisement columns; finally they inserted one of their joint composition:

"Wanted: two rooms for the purpose of establishing a small hat shop in a fashionable part of town. Rent must be moderate."

They were inundated with letters.

Finally Chapel Street, S.W., was selected. Sabrina insisted upon an agreement; and Miranda said that everything between partners should be set forth in black and white. The day before the agreement was signed Miranda spoke a last word to Esther.

"Sabrina Lovell has shown me the agreement."

"It's more in my favour than hers. Don't you think so?"

"Yes—if you can trust her."

"Trust—Sabrina?"

"My dear, you must get out of the trick of raising your pretty eyebrows unnecessarily high. Keep your forehead smooth as long as you can. Sabrina Lovell is a good sort—that's why I tried to bring you together—but you are risking your little capital; she has no—capital——"

"She shares her income with me."

"True. But if you lost your capital she might decline to go on sharing the income."

"You don't know Sabrina."

"I admit it cheerfully. No woman does really know another woman."

"She would share her last crust with a friend."

"You have shown the agreement to your solicitor?"

"Of course. I am twenty-one next month, and the money is not mine till then. He" (the man of law was indicated) "is a regular old woman."

"He might be something worse. I am an irregular old woman."

"You will always be young, Miranda."

"I am old as the hills when it comes to business; old when I pinch and screw to save a few pounds; only young," she smiled and sighed, "when I'm spending money, my dear."

"And time," added Esther, taking her hand.

"You ought to say those pleasant things to men. I can't imagine why the men aren't buzzing round you. Honeypot you are. Marriage would suit you a heap better than selling hats. Where on earth is Jack?"

Esther kissed her and whispered:

"Once there was a Harry. I can't talk about him, and you mustn't ask questions. By the way, speaking of my solicitor, Mr. Bostock, I am to receive what he calls a communication on my twenty-first birthday."

"Oh! Mystery?"

"Yes; I'm sure from his face and manner that it's something unpleasant. But I'm hardened now."

"Pooh! Soft as cream cheese still."

"I'm not."

"You are. Well, I believe you can trust Sabrina; but suppose anything happened to her, what then?"

"She has splendid health."

"So have I, but I shall turn up my toes one day—perhaps to-morrow. I'm getting so fat that I shall be run over by a motor."

"One must take some chances."

"Yes; that's true. I shall buy a hat from you; my pupils must buy hats; my friends must buy hats."

The repapering of the rooms in Chapel Street occupied both girls for a few days, and during an exciting fortnight the name of the firm was chosen—*Sabrina et Cie.* Circular letters were printed, and later a journey to Paris undertaken. High hope coloured two pairs of cheeks; but the word "fun," too often in Esther's mouth, provoked a rebuke.

"The real fun will begin when we touch our profits. I mean to touch them, if there are any. I shall put fifty sovereigns into a basin and wash my hands in them."

"You have no regrets, Sabrina, about the stage?"

"I feel towards the stage as you feel towards Harry Rye. If I were offered a big engagement I should refuse it."

"Rubbish! I could attend to the shop."

"And who, pray, would attend to you?"

About this time an incident occurred, trifling in itself, but one to be recorded. Esther and Sabrina were wandering through the New Gallery, when Esther exclaimed, as heedless of grammar as the good folk in the "Jackdaw of Rheims":

"That's him!"

She pointed excitedly at a portrait hanging upon the line; a remarkable piece of work by an artist just beginning to challenge attention. Other portraits compared with this seemed commonplace, partly because the face indicated a masterful personality and partly because the treatment suggested a story. The accessories in the picture had been presented with a few strong touches, everything being subordinate to the head and hands, and yet these accessories—of no particular interest to the beholder—denoted an overmastering passion in the model. A man was standing in a laboratory, holding up a test-tube upon which his eyes were fixed in a glance so penetrating and intense that curiosity as to what the test-tube might contain became mordant. One saw a colourless fluid. In the dim background a plain deal table was covered by shadowy glass retorts and other paraphernalia.

"Who is he?" said Sabrina.

"The doctor I met in Piccadilly Circus."

She had told the story to Sabrina.

Esther looked at the catalogue. Number 271 bore the name Harvey Napier, and after it, F.R.C.S.

"Have you ever heard of Harvey Napier?" Esther asked after a pause.

"No," said Sabrina, with her eyes on the portrait, "but we shall hear of him. He's small and ugly, but what a forehead! What eyes!"

"And, evidently, he cares to look at nothing except what is in that tube."

"That is why we shall hear of him some day."

"He has had his bad times, too," murmured Esther.

"You are sure it's the same man?"

"Absolutely."

Sabrina stepped back, holding up her hands to isolate the face.

"I see triumph, eh? Those few drops represent, perhaps, months of work. How cleverly the means are subordinated: mere shadows. But the end, the result, is there. He holds it in his hands as if it were the Grail. It may be the Grail to him, to obtain which he has had to sacrifice what other men hold dear."

"Sabrina, you make me see that. How wonderful you are!"

"The triumph is tempered by some emotion I can't quite interpret. Do you think he is counting the cost?" Esther nodded as Sabrina continued:

"I see books, innumerable books, ghosts of books! He has read them all. The painter is a wizard. This is a great moment, but he is not quite satisfied. He knows that he has paid too much. Perhaps the janitor can give us information."

But the janitor, good, easy fellow, knew nothing except that the portrait aroused interest.

"It's some doctor. There's poison in that tube."

"How do you know?"

"It's poison," the man repeated obstinately. "A swell said so; I heard him."

The girls went back to the picture. Sabrina frowned at the test-tube.

"If it's poison he may be wondering whether he has discovered good or evil."

"We must find out more about him."

A doctor supplied details. Napier was a rising man, a specialist in diseases of women and children, and the author of a text-book on toxicology; he was a bachelor, a man of few friends, something of a recluse, with a bedside manner not to be described as engaging. "He tells 'em what he really thinks," concluded their informant, "and they don't like it."

The portrait impressed itself upon Esther's mind, but other things covered it up, the obscuring films of new experiences. Nevertheless, she had the instinct that Napier and she would meet again and the vague hope that the meeting might take place soon. Sabrina expressed the opinion that women were beneath his horizon. "He has never had time to fall in love," she asserted.

In October Esther came of age. Sabrina and she dined together at an inexpensive restaurant and went to the play, occupying two stalls, free seats of course, in a crowded house. But Sabrina, after a leisurely survey, whispered the word "Paper!"

"How do you know?"

"Unmistakable. Look at the frocks! Look at the men! And the expressions! They all come conscious that the piece is doomed. Funereal—isn't it? And they won't applaud if they can possibly help it; and they'll crab the play, good or bad."

The play happened, however, to be good and admirably cast; but coming out of the theatre two stout dowagers on their way to supper at the Savoy muttered that the entertainment was much too long. These

ladies had paid for their stalls; the free list, returning to the suburbs with nothing more exciting ahead than sandwiches and lager, pronounced the play "too sad." Men slaving from nine to six in the city, women with more children than servants, and pallid from the strenuous endeavour to make weekly cash receipts balance weekly bills, wanted to be amused by farce or thrilled by melodrama.

"They think sometimes," said Sabrina, "but they do their thinking outside the theatre. This play is fine, but it won't last three weeks, and the cast has been rehearsing for nearly six without pay. Some of 'em will earn less than a fiver for two months' work. We must do better than that with our hats."

"I shall have my five hundred pounds to-morrow."

"And the communication?"

"And the communication."

Esther went alone to the offices of Barnwell & Bostock, in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Old Mr. Bostock was associated in her mind with horrors, for he had broken to her, as considerately as possible, the news of her father's defalcations. The fact that he was so terribly shocked had made the recital more poignant, for Barnwell & Bostock had acted as Mr. Yorke's private solicitors and knew nothing, except by hearsay, of the affairs of the bank.

Esther was ushered into a private room which exuded respectability from every pore. It was stuffy and small; but certain names printed in white letters upon black tin boxes were as refreshing as ozone to

those who believe that our landed gentry are the backbone of the kingdom.

"Sit down, my dear young lady. Can I offer you a glass of barley water?"

"No, thank you," said Esther nervously.

The old man fumbled with some papers. His fingers shook as he took from a drawer a memorandum-book and opened it.

"Did your father ever speak to you of your mother?"

"Never."

"She was a charming woman."

"You knew her, Mr. Bostock?"

"Quite well."

He took off his spectacles and polished the lenses, looking from them to his client with a distress which appealed to Esther.

"Mr. Bostock," she said, "I am sure that what you have to tell me pains you"—he nodded—"but I can't remember my mother, and I am quite prepared for something disagreeable. After what has passed nothing can hurt me very much."

"Your father ran away with your mother."

"Ran away?"

She tried to visualise this elopement, and failed. Her father remained the automaton, the machine.

"Yes."

"It sounds incredible."

"She was the wife of another man."

"Oh!"

"Who had treated her abominably."

"Oh, oh!"

"She behaved like an angel. The man was a client of mine and not responsible. He became insane. At the risk of her life she took care of him till others—I amongst the number—interfered. He was placed in a private asylum, and he is there still."

A silence followed, broken only by the rustling of the papers moved by the lawyer's thin, wrinkled hand. Presently he said slowly: "The marriage laws of this country may be a blessing to many, but they can be a terrible curse to the few. The wife of an incurable madman can obtain no divorce."

"My mother never married my father?"

"She resisted him as long as she could. He was a masterful man, and he adored her. When she died, in a sort of sense, he died, too. I have known three such cases, only three. Your father was intended to be the exact opposite of what he became afterwards. Your mother and he had two years of happiness abroad. Here is a letter from her to me."

He held out an envelope.

My dear friend,—After all you have done and tried to do for me, I must write to tell you how completely happy I am. As you know I had denied the possibility of happiness; and always I had laughed at Douglas when he told me, over and over again, that he held it in trust for me. My only regret is that I did not go to him sooner. I don't think we shall ever return to England. Douglas is satisfied with Italy, and so am I. I want my baby to be born in this land of sun so that it may be warmed through and through. I was never warm till I lived here Come and see us when you have ten days to spare. . . .

"There is one more," said the lawyer. Then he added with a sigh: "I did visit them, shortly before you were born. I have never seen two persons so entirely happy, and so absolutely interdependent upon each other."

Esther read the second letter:

My dear friend,—The baby has my eyes and skin. Between ourselves Douglas is jealous of it. He thinks it stands between him and me. His devotion is something extraordinary. Now that my health is not what it was I seem to realise more fully the strength of his feeling for me. We are going to the mountains next week, and soon I shall be myself again. This is a scrappy letter, but really I'm still ridiculously weak, as you will divine from my handwriting.

Esther laid the letter upon her lap.

"She went to the mountains," said Mr. Bostock, "but she didn't recover her strength. She died."

"And then——?"

"Your father came home with you. I hardly recognised him. He went back to business, founded the bank, devoted himself to the accumulation of money. He became very rich. I saw little of him. I made his will. At that time I promised to tell you what I have told you in the event of his decease. I think that's all. If you would like to keep those letters——"

"Thank you very much."

"And now about this enterprise of yours?"

They talked hat-shop for half an hour. At the end the lawyer said in his deliberate tone: "You will have your way, and perhaps you are right. Still, if the money were invested——"

Esther repeated her phrase: "One must take certain chances."

"Yes; and the world is divided into the lucky and the unlucky."

"My mother was unlucky, Mr. Bostock?"

"She had two wonderful years."

Esther went her way. Sabrina was waiting for her at her lodging, but she felt dazed, unable to think or to speak with lucidity. Alone, in the Temple Gardens, she tried to marshal her whirling thoughts.

Ever since her father's death an increasing resentment against poverty and discomfort and the sordid side of life had thrown into high relief her desire for happiness and tranquillity, and her terror lest these should be denied to her. And, day by day, she had realised that misery and suffering are imposed upon the many. Not a dozen feet away was a magnificent perambulator in which a baby lay asleep, a dimpled darling, upon whose pink, plump prettiness money and care and love had been lavished. Staring at the baby stood a little girl, ragged, dirty, with that hopeless, helpless expression of misery upon her pinched face so indescribably terrible and pathetic.

Of what was the child thinking? Did envy tear her small heart?

Suddenly perceiving Esther's eyes upon her, she said sharply:

"Ain't it pretty?"

A well-nourished nurse bade the waif begone in a voice not to be disregarded. Esther beckoned, and the girl limped up to her, sucking a black thumb. A

few questions elicited as many facts. The child lived in a kennel with drunken parents. She was half-starved. To give to her food, to learn her address in the hope of finding sanctuary for her in some hospital where hip-disease would justify admission, engrossed Esther for half an hour, and lightened her own burdens. Then her thoughts returned, like boomerangs, to the point of departure: the bar sinister across her birth. And not till then did she consider its relation to her love affair with Rye, which shows that her love or fancy for our paladin had diminished. When she did think of him she smiled faintly and murmured to herself: "What an escape for Harry!"

CHAPTER VI

A CLOUD IN A CLEAR SKY

"We are coining money," said Esther.

Sabrina closed the ledger. Esther laughed, exhibiting dimples of satisfaction. Sabrina looked serious and bit the end of a quill.

"All the same, I wish some of these fine ladies would pay their bills."

"We must give them time."

"Six months hard, if I had my way, without the option of a fine."

"The ones who don't pay send us customers who do."

"Not always."

Esther recalled the case of a dashing she who had bought five hats and introduced a dear friend. The new customer ordered half a dozen, just to go "one better," as she put it; and ten days later, dropping in to express her delight and satisfaction, had borrowed five pounds on the evergreen plea that her purse had been left at home. The lady happened to be a countess, but—as Sabrina remarked—that made the offence more rank.

However, *Sabrina et Cie.* (and in particular the *Cie.*) were prospering. Sabrina was now living with Esther in the dingy street near Mecklenburg Square. But they talked, you may be sure, of a small flat not

too far from the park, spoken of as the château in France—Spain, admittedly, being unreasonably distant. Esther sold hats to her old friends and acquaintances, and offered them tea in Chapel Street, not to mention delectable sandwiches; but she refused to reveal the address in Bloomsbury.

"Where *do* you live, my dear?" said Mrs. Rockingham Trigg.

"I live in a castle which is moving nearer and nearer to Hyde Park every day," replied our heroine.

Lady Matilda drank tea with her dearest Esther, and pronounced the hats to be "deevy." From the fond mother leaked information concerning her boy, now a second secretary of legation, and preening his wings for higher flights.

"He'll be an ambassador some day," predicted Lady Matilda.

The little lady went away in a pleasant humour, having bought a modest hat, which she told Dorothea she didn't really want, because dear Esther had "behaved so well." Then Dorothea called and bought hats and hats and hats, some of which she must have given away. The gulf between these old friends was almost bridged once.

"Did Harry ask you to marry him?" said Dorothea abruptly.

Esther frowned, but replied quickly, "Yes."

"Why didn't you take him?"

"What is not enough for one will hardly do for two or three."

In another instant Dorothea would have said ve-

hemently: "I told him to ask you; I wanted him to marry you; I knew that it was a tremendous opportunity—for him." Unfortunately a customer rustled in, and Esther said awkwardly, "Forgive me, but I must attend to my own little business."

Dorothea, acutely sensitive, conceived herself to be snubbed. She hurried away with a faint flush upon her cheeks. We must admit that Esther used the wrong phrase, or at least one conveying a double meaning, but Dorothea's abrupt question had upset her. It was quite unthinkable that Mrs. George Treherne approved a marriage between her only brother and the penniless daughter of Douglas Yorke. We may add that the delusion was not wilful on either side.

The paladin remained at The Hague. Not a word, not a message, came across the North Sea. He had heard of the hat shop, of course; and one has a glimpse of him shuddering. A photograph, taken at this time by the Court photographer, exhibits our Harry in the distinguished uniform of the Corps Diplomatique. His face has a fuller curve; he wears a discreet smile (the French word *marquois* describes it better); and he stands solidly, as becomes a future pillar of the State. It was whispered in boudoirs that the young fellow had loved and lost. Having suffered shipwreck, who could blame him for steering wide of the rocks upon which the sirens sit and sing? But the sense that he had risen to an occasion sustained him; he slept with an approving conscience self-justified as a lion-hearted cricketer and an Imperialist.

During the following season *Sabrina et Cie.* moved into larger premises, paying a rent in geometrical proportion. Esther's coaxing overruled Sabrina's commonsense. Miranda Jagg, being an optimist, cast a determining vote.

"Back your luck!" said this sporting old woman.

"Keep it in the bank," retorted Sabrina.

The irony of fate decreed that Miss Lovell should be offered a London engagement, which she refused, not without heart-burnings and dolors. Esther and Miranda entreated her to accept it. At the moment the great move was taking place.

"I am wanted here," said Sabrina.

How badly she was wanted, only she knew, and her lips closed upon that knowledge. Ten times a day, at least, she put the brake upon Esther's dashing driving of their little apple cart. She tightened loosely-held reins; she indicated ruts and holes; she refused to give up the key of the corn crib.

"It's the pace that kills," she repeated again and again.

They made an admirable working team, though the apple cart was pulled tandem-wise, Esther being on the lead, prancing and cantering, Sabrina doggedly trotting between the shafts. Those ladies whose memories will carry them back eight seasons will recall frequent mention of the firm upon theatrical programmes. Stars scintillated in hats furnished by *Sabrina et Cie.* There is no better advertisement than this, but it is costly, as we shall soon discover. Providing

headgear for countesses who don't pay may be cheaper.

At the end of the season both women were fagged. Mrs. Rockingham Trigg insisted that "Her young friend ought to enjoy a well-earned holiday." Sabrina, with a nose perhaps too keen for platitudes, repeated the phrase exasperatingly: "You must enjoy a well-earned holiday."

"By myself?"

"Bed and board in stately homes await you."

"I shall not enter stately homes, and you know it."

Sabrina knew it. Esther had hammered home the knowledge with her bar sinister, using it as a shillelagh. When our heroine left the Temple Gardens, she left in them—or thought she did—vain regrets and repinings. She faced Sabrina with a smile upon white lips. Sabrina glanced at red eyelids, and then listened to a Declaration of Independence delivered too dramatically to be quite convincing.

"I am naked, but not ashamed," said Esther. And yet she blushed.

"Why should you be ashamed?"

"If I blush," said poor Esther, conscious of burning cheeks, "it is for the marriage laws of this country. Andromeda was chained to a rock; English law and equity chained my mother to a monster—a raving maniac—who is alive still!"

Sabrina nodded, making no reply. Contrasted with Esther's ingenuous confidence, the elder woman's reserve became aggressively salient.

"You say nothing, Sabrina."

Sabrina laughed.

"Perhaps I am tired of words, which mean so little and seem to mean so much."

"You think that most people don't say what they mean?"

"I am of Talleyrand's opinion about speech."

"You are too hard."

"Perhaps. I don't let people impose on me more than twice. You do; and you will pay dearly for that. Mark me, Esther, in essentials men and women don't change much, except for the worse! Liars and cowards and humbugs remain liars and cowards and humbugs till they die—and perhaps afterwards."

She laughed drearily. Esther kissed her.

"This communication of Mr. Bostock's leaves me with a free hand."

"Does it? What do you mean?"

"I can do what I please, regardless of Mrs. Grundy."

"What pleases you now may displease a couple of years hence."

Then the subject was buried. It did not rise from the tomb till the mention of stately homes. Sabrina, feeling herself challenged, answered deliberately:

"You are morbid."

"If you are proud of it, I've nothing more to say. Anyway, you would be bored to tears at Trigg Court."

"I shouldn't. I'd like to wallow at Trigg Court. They have a *chef*, and they breakfast at ten. The lawn slopes to the river. I should lie in a punt, and listen to the bees droning. I should wear our prettiest hats

as an 'ad.' I should reflect with complacency that I might be reading aloud to Mrs. Trigg's aged aunt, or lying at the bottom of the Thames!"

"Morbid again!"

"Even Mrs. Trigg's talk would entertain me, because it enhances the value of yours."

"If you won't go to Trigg Court, go to Jericho or Bath. I'll hold the fort till you return."

Finally, a coin was spun to decide which of the two should take their holiday first. Esther won. Fate decreed also that Miranda Jagg felt the necessity of fresher air than could be obtained at an open window near Covent Garden. She offered herself as chaperon, and spoke joyously of shrimps at Margate.

"Did you take a holiday last year?" demanded the suspicious Esther.

"No, my dear."

"The year before?"

"My dear, don't force me to make humiliating confessions."

"You are doing this on my account?"

"What cheek!"

"Call it instinct. At any rate I accept gladly. Margate for ever!"

"For a fortnight," said Miranda.

The pair flitted a few days later, leaving Sabrina with a crate full of new "shapes" from Paris, and the as yet unsolved problem: "What will be worn next October?" Miranda, prattling of shrimps and minstrels and the brandyballs, which she had eaten as a little girl, at the very time when she appeared as

Puck in the famous production of the "Midsummer Night's Dream," by her grandfather, Charles James Bean, did not notice at first that Esther was unduly silent. But a jest of the illustrious comedian being received with nothing more appreciative than an absent-minded stare, Miss Jagg said sharply: "What on earth's the matter, child?"

"A funny thing happened yesterday: Sabrina fainted."

"Pish!" (Miranda used this archaic exclamation because it was often in the mouth of Charles James.) "That's nothing! When I was a girl it was considered genteel to faint. We practised fainting. The heroines fainted when the hero proposed."

"It was very stuffy yesterday."

"Sabrina is strong. Don't worry about her."

"She overdoes. Every night she's dog tired."

"Who isn't? Workers ought to be tired. I generally crawl into bed foundered; and I'm so stiff in the morning that I wish I'd died in the night. But after my rasher and a couple of eggs life seems worth living again."

"Sabrina has tea and toast."

"I'm very sorry to hear it. You're not that sort of fool, are you?"

"I can look an egg in the face, not a rasher."

"Fainted, did she? Not like her, I must say."

"She was furious with herself, and with me for fussing."

"Don't let's fuss now! Do you think you could eat a gingerbread nut?"

'I'd rather not try," said Esther. She added re-tively: "Sabrina will report to-morrow."

Next day, a cheery letter melted the tiny cloud in ther's sky. And during the whole of her holiday sun blazed uninterruptedly upon just and unjust Margate. Miranda and Esther bathed, and sat on sand, and listened to the minstrels. Afterwards, :her was perfectly happy. Miranda had been so e in her selection of Margate instead of a fashion-e watering-place. The world that works goes to rgate to play. Elderly men may be seen paddling l building castles in the sand. Esther knew that belonged to this mirth-making, mirth-loving wd, whose laughter was so unmistakably sincere. anda, too, was of the people. The illustrious ndfather had been known to drop an "h" or two—the stage! But above and beyond everything else the supreme, soul-satisfying delight of knowing t she was in the crowd and not under it, ruthlessly ihed and trampled upon! She had held her own, more than her own. Even Mrs. Rockingham Trigg admitted that selling hats, if you sold enough, ht be a more interesting if less respectable occupa-than reading the *Times* aloud to an aged lady in on Place.

un and air did more than colour her too pale com-ion. The delicate tissues of the mind assumed a thier tint. The slightly morbid taint was hidden he tan.

I never felt so strong," she told Miranda at the of the first week.

"Good! We women need every ounce of strength we can come by. Have some more shrimps?"

"Nothing frightens me," said Esther.

"You stood on your chair yesterday when a mouse ran across the room."

"I am speaking, of course, of moral things. A mouse or a tiger will always terrify me. I used to have exactly the same sort of horror of disease and dirt and ignorance, but now I am almost spoiling for a fight."

"You are pot-valiant. My grandfather used to say that he acted best when he was full of beef and beer."

"That sounds horribly gross."

"My dear, life, real life, is a gross affair. Let us admit it frankly. Most of the great men and women of action have not succeeded from being over-squeamish or underfed."

"The God in them, not the animal, triumphed. If you mean the truly great."

"But the animal in them, my dear, enabled them to subdue the same beast in others."

"They had to conquer the beast in themselves before they conquered the beast in others."

"That's it."

"There's a horrid little pig in me, Miranda. If I make bacon of him——"

"You will always have a rasher to offer to a friend."

The piping hours passed swiftly. Esther found herself wondering what her holiday would have been like without a companion. Comradeship had become a

ıecessity. Her two friends were essentially comrades, ındued with qualities of fortitude, good temper and ıumour. At the first glimpse of Miranda in pink lressing-gown and carpet slippers, our heroine had xperienced a not disagreeable thrill of superiority. Now, Miranda occupied a pedestal. Sabrina, too, tood upon a mountain top, with her head against the tars. Esther's thoughts seldom wandered as far as The Hague, but, in a sense, the memory of what Harry ad been (and of what he had not been) kept other ıen at arm's length. Three youths had approached ıithin measurable distance. Measured by Sabrina, hey had been dismissed. Sabrina carried tape and ɔot rule. You might have supposed her an accredited udge at a dog show. Points were seriously considered; good coat and markings served rather to emphasise too weak back or a tucked-in-tail. Young women in ırge expensive hats brought their "boys" to the hat ıop. Sometimes the boys paid overdue accounts, but ɜ a rule this seemed to be the special privilege of the iddle-aged and elderly. You can't pick and choose ɔur customers, but you can criticise them. A year the hat shop had taught Esther more about human ıture than a decade spent in Palace Gardens. Harry ight have said that the bloom was off, but he would ıve been mistaken. The bloom remained, cherished ' Sabrina. Esther believed herself to be a woman; ıbrina knew her to be still a child, because, despite e daily, hourly, revelation of meanness, greed, lust, obbishness, and dishonesty, she remained enthusias- ally the optimist, beholding things and people as e wished them to be instead of as they were.

Esther returned to the hat shop, dropping Miranda and her shabby trunk in Covent Garden.

Sabrina smiled at rosy cheeks and embrowned hands.

"I'm ready for anything," declared Esther.

"Are you?" said Sabrina, still smiling.

"Have you decided where you're going?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"I'll tell you when we get home. Come and look at the autumn hats."

The amount of work done astonished Esther, but when she said so, Sabrina muttered: "I was alone. I had to work. I had a stock-taking too."

"A stock-taking—why?"

"I wanted to know just how we stood. Virot believes that fur will be used as a trimming this winter. I have bought a lot of it very cheap."

"You look awfully——"

"Yellow," said Sabrina, calmly.

"Well, sallow."

"If fur is worn we shall have a pretty balance sheet at Christmas."

They talked "shop" till closing time.

That night they dined. As a rule, they supped, simply and inexpensively. Mrs. Willet had been a cook in a noble family, before Willet, a butler in the same family, had led her to the altar and thence to the dingy street near Mecklenburg Square. Her hand had lost some of its cunning with sauces, but she could grill a sole and baste a grouse. Upon the table were roses, and candles in petticoat shades to match them.

"How cosy!" said Esther. "It is jolly to be home gain."

She glanced affectionately from Sabrina to the fa- iliar bookcase and the divan piled high with cushions. he room had become sanctuary to both of them.

At dinner, Esther sparkled, having the knack of vid description. Margate was presented enveloped a mist of amber and rose.

"I wallowed," said Esther, with a flying allusion to e piglet in her.

Sabrina made the coffee.

"And now—about yourself?"

"Let me light up first."

Esther curled herself up among the cushions.

"I feel like a cat who has had an extra allowance cream."

'Don't!"

'Don't what?"

'Don't purr! It makes it hard for me."

'Gracious! What has happened?"

'I am going to take my holiday in a private hos- al."

n an instant Esther was off the divan and on her es beside her friend, holding her hand, glancing iously up into her face. In the distance the light n the candles seemed to grow dim. Something strous invaded the pretty room, a chill shadow de- ded like a black fog.

They are not quite sure what it is," said Sabrina er soft voice, "but they are going to find out."

Going to—to operate?"

"Yes. Don't tremble, Esther, and for God's sake don't cry! I want all my own courage, and all that I can borrow."

"I won't cry," said Esther, but the tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I have made the arrangement," Sabrina continued in the same soft tone. "There is a nursing home not very far from here. The matron is a good sort. Your doctor is going to operate."

"*My* doctor?"

"Harvey Napier."

"What a strange coincidence!"

"Not at all. I liked his face in that picture. I went to him."

There was a pause. Then Esther whispered: "Have you told your husband?"

"No. He might be playing in a competition."

"They will let me nurse you."

"Certainly not. But you will visit me—afterwards."

"Is it—er—a very d-d-dangerous operation?"

"They call it 'capital.' To a surgeon, I suppose, it is capital. I caught a gleam in Mr. Napier's eye."

"If I see that, I shall loathe him."

"He has been very kind. I asked him what was in the test tube. You remember how curious we were. He laughed and said 'Water'!"

"Water?"

"I asked him what he was really looking at. And he laughed again, and said an alkaloid that so far had eluded him. He plays hide and seek with the

;etable poisons. I'm interested in him, but he's a chine. Some day he may become a man. Do you id if we talk of something else?"

'When do you go to the nursing home?"

'To-morrow afternoon."

'Sabrina, you have worked too hard."

'No; I asked that question. It would have come rway. Tell me about Miranda. Did she wear her ssing-gown on the sand?"

'That we should have been laughing and chattering n you were alone with—this!"

'I wanted you to laugh and chatter. When I look you I smell the sea. The sand is still in your hair nd the sunshine."

'I can't bear it," said Esther hoarsely. "I can't r it."

'But you must," Sabrina replied.

They went to bed late. Esther unpacked her box, l put away her clothes, eyeing them with repug- ce. She had hardly finished when Sabrina came in.

'I'm going to brush the sand out of your hair," she ounced.

Esther sat down. Sabrina brushed her hair, and n plaited it. Esther was sensible that some subtle ngth was passing from Sabrina to herself. Her d, which had ached horribly, became cool and free n pain beneath the touch of her friend's hand. rage flowed into her, banishing terror and sooth- racked nerves. And Sabrina's silence, so dignified, me significant. What could be said in alleviation blow so sudden and cruel? Nothing.

"You have beautiful hair, Esther."

They were the first words.

"So Harry said."

His name slipped from her lips. She was not thinking of the *preux chevalier*.

"Harry! I had forgotten your Harry."

"Not mine."

"If you whistled, he would come to you."

"Would he? I shall not whistle."

"If you wanted him very badly, you would whistle."

"My whistle would frighten him now."

Sabrina said no more.

When she had gone Esther went to bed, but she couldn't sleep. And she dared not blow out the candle. Darkness had never terrified her since she was a child. She listened. The walls were thin, and Sabrina occupied the next room. Presently she heard a faint scratching. Sabrina was writing. Esther slipped from the bed and tapped softly at her friend's door.

"Come in!"

Sabrina sat at a table, writing.

"I can't sleep without asking you a question."

"Ask it."

Esther crossed, laying her hand upon Sabrina's shoulder.

"Are you afraid, Sabrina?"

"I think not. Not afraid of death, if you mean that."

"I should be horribly afraid. What a coward I am!"

Sabrina stood up and took Esther's face between r two hands, gazing at it.

"I am afraid of life," she answered quietly.

Esther returned to her bedroom, Sabrina to her iting. She wrote on steadily for nearly an hour; en she went to Esther's door and listened with bended ad till her ears caught the sound of measured breath- g. She opened the door and, shading the flame of e candle she carried, approached the bed. Esther r like a child who has cried itself to sleep after tless tossings. The pillow was pulled down and mpled; the bedclothes were flung to one side; her lashes were still wet; and one hand was tightly nched; the other, in significant contrast, showed the ık palm and relaxed fingers.

The sun-kissed cheeks glowed against the whiteness the pillow. The red lips, just parted, revealed the all, even teeth. In repose the charm and the weak- s of the face made a poignant appeal to the woman zing at her friend, whom she had learned to love ter than anyone else in the world.

Esther slept—and smiled in her sleep, hearing per- ps the splash of the waves upon the sand, and the ghter of the children. Sabrina, in her place, would e lain awake. But Nature is kind to her weaklings. her had sunk into this sweet slumber because physic- r and mentally she was exhausted. She tired easily. The strong woman, who did not tire easily, sighed. m I afraid?" she was asking herself, and the an- r came quickly, "Not for myself, but for her."

CHAPTER VII

MIRANDA CONSULTS THE CARDS

EACH time they passed the nursing home Miranda and Esther would pause, staring with wrinkled foreheads at the window upon the second floor, which was wide open. They could see the bunch of roses which Miranda had brought with her, and above it a curtain of white cheese-cloth showed bulgingly, blown outward by the draught. The bed therefore was still empty, awaiting the tenant, who lay senseless in the operating-room. When the curtain ceased to bulge this first period of dreadful suspense would terminate. The watching women would feel at liberty to re-enter the house and ask for news. During a terrible hour and a half they had paced the quiet street, and other streets in the immediate neighbourhood, never straying very far. Poor Miranda panted. Her normal exercise was taken intermittently: this everlasting tramping exhausted her.

They stared at other windows. This house of pain was gaily decked as if for a festival. Fresh paint, flowers, gleaming brass, smote the eye with a stunning sense of incongruity. At one of the windows a nurse was standing. She was dressed in virginal blue and white; she looked as fresh as dew; her face exhibited a placidity and serenity quite amazing.

"I should hate to be a nurse," said Esther fiercely.

"It's well paid," said Miranda. "You would make a splendid nurse," she added, after a pause, "and look the part, too."

"That one is quite fatly contented. I declare she has a dimple."

"If I were dying," said Miranda, "I should like to look at a dimple."

Very slowly they walked the length of the street and back again. The interminable minutes indicated the increasing gravity of the case. The matron had hinted at an hour; nearly two had elapsed.

"There!" exclaimed Esther excitedly.

The white curtain no longer bulged.

They crossed the street hurriedly. Esther pressed the electric bell. The nurse who opened the door said in an expressionless voice, "Mr. Napier will see you."

At once pangs pierced the friends. If the operation had been successful, surely this woman would know it. Her seeming indifference must mask horrors.

"She is all right?" faltered Esther.

"Miss Lovell has just been carried upstairs. She will come to in half an hour. This way, please."

They were shown into a pleasant sitting-room, furnished with taste and discretion. Here the matron greeted them with courtesy. She stopped Esther's questions with a phrase: "I know nothing; Mr. Napier will be here in a couple of minutes." With professional acuteness she turned to Miranda, still gasping. "Can I offer you something—a cup of tea?"

"A small whisky and soda, please," said Miss Jagg.

"Certainly."

She went to the door and whispered the order. Esther felt impressed and soothed by her massive composure and general appearance of robustness and immaculate cleanliness. The very sight of her was antiseptic. She aroused curiosity. Esther knew her name—Tower, and nothing more. The nurse had spoken of her as Mrs. Tower, but she might have assumed brevet rank. And the name also might be assumed. It was so pat to her occupation and individuality; a tower, indeed! The house belonged to her.

"Is she fatly content, too?" thought Esther.

The friends sat down, but Mrs. Tower stood—solid from head to foot. One could not conceive her young or old. She might have been made to order, approved by the College of Surgeons, and secured monumentally, in her present position. Her eyes, of a cool grey in tint, were small and steadily watchful. Nothing escaped their penetrating vigilance. Her hands were beautifully shaped; exquisite instruments wherewith to execute specialised work; her touch might be heavy or light as down, never clumsy. Her mouth seemed to be fashioned by the artist who supplies lips to the high priests of the Roman Catholic Church. Wise counsel flower from it, cooling common-sense, but never an indiscreet or tactless word.

A quick step was heard upon the tiled corridor outside, the door opened, and Napier entered.

"Miss Yorke—Miss Jagg—Mr. Napier."

The surgeon bowed. He looked, physically, very frail and thin, being undersized. His shoulders had a stoop. But his fine head challenged and held attention.

"How is your patient?" she exclaimed.

"The operation has been successful."

"Thank God! Thank God!"

"It was much more severe than I anticipated."

His grave tone alarmed both women. Miranda opened her mouth and closed it. Esther said tremblingly, "But the worst is over?"

"It is too early to say anything." Then in a harsh voice, tempered by sympathetic inflections, he added, "We have met before, Miss Yorke?"

"Yes."

"Where? Forgive the question."

"In Piccadilly Circus. You thought I was ill. You put me into a hansom."

"I remember the incident perfectly."

"Can I see my friend this afternoon?"

"Impossible. The shock to the system has been very great. The day after to-morrow, perhaps. I can't promise."

He hurried away to perform another operation elsewhere.

"Is he very clever?" Esther murmured to Mrs. Tower.

"In these cases the cleverest in London. We shall do our best for Miss Lovell; and her courage is quite out of the ordinary. That is in her favour. Try not to worry."

They waited an hour till word came that Sabrina had regained consciousness. Then they drove in a cab to Miranda's rooms. Her classes did not begin for a couple of days, so they had the large saloon—as

Miranda called it—to themselves. They tried to choke down some food. After luncheon Miranda played a game of patience. In vital affairs she consulted the cards, being as superstitious as any member of her profession. Nothing would have induced her to begin rehearsing for a new piece on a Friday; and a black cat rubbing against her made her feel ten years younger. She shuffled and cut the cards three times, wishing fervently that Sabrina might regain high health. If the patience came out properly her friend might be expected to make a complete recovery; if a grace or two were needed, convalescence would be slow and difficult; if the cards failed entirely, then——!

Esther watched her, fascinated by Miranda's ridiculous faith in painted pasteboard. The whole scene was fantastic, unreal. The upper end of the room was arranged formally for a scene out of a modern comedy. Two chairs and a table down left; a settee up right; windows centre. Hanging on pegs were different properties; a couple of foils; a long black cape lined with faded red silk, a couple of wigs upon blocks, and a stimulating steel engraving of Charles James Bean as the Young Roscius. In a cabinet were fans, snuff-boxes, a velvet mask, and the famous helmet which Charles James had worn in the part of Coriolanus. Against the cabinet, distinguished and jaunty, leaned a Malacca cane, with a knot of puce-coloured riband. Miranda had inviolate rules concerning the "nice conduct of a clouded cane."

Presently Esther's attention wandered. She did not understand this particular patience; and Miranda

played with exasperating deliberation, staring at each card as if it were bewitched. At the end of half an hour only a few cards were left in her hand. She glanced furtively at Esther, drooping despondently over a dramatic paper. Perspiration stood in beads upon Miranda's forehead. The patience—grace or no grace—was not coming out. For a moment her plump pretty hand hovered hesitatingly over the cards already played. Then, with a second furtive glance she swiftly extracted a vile knave who insisted on remaining where he was not wanted, and a miserable, insignificant deuce, who had played the deuce, indeed, from the beginning. These she replaced in other rows, and then said in a tone that proclaimed the actress of genius:

"My dear, come here and see how nicely it works out."

Esther obeyed with alacrity, willing to persuade herself that this straw served to indicate the direction of the current. Miranda, smiling blandly, played the remaining cards to a successful issue.

"And it's a difficult patience?" asked Esther.

"Very."

Miranda removed her spectacles, and turned her chair, exposing an ample lap. Esther sat down on it.

"Do you really believe in the cards?"

Miranda nodded.

"How warm you are!"

"A minute ago it seemed absolutely certain that it would not come out."

Esther looked at a presentation clock, a handsome

affair. Three hours had passed since they left the nursing home.

"I can inquire at four. You will stay here."

"I think I shall try another patience."

"For mercy's sake, don't. It's nonsense, of course, but let us leave well enough alone."

"Mrs. Tower promised to wire if there was any change."

"If you had a telephone——"

"There is one in the typewriting office downstairs. I'll go."

"Let me."

Miranda could be very firm on occasion. "They know me, my dear. You stay here."

Outside on the landing one could hear plainly the ticking of the machines in the room below, where half a dozen girls were working furiously. In another room two girls were reading script aloud, with eyes alert for blunders. The principal sat at her desk. The telephone stood beside her.

"May I use your 'phone?"

"With pleasure, Miss Jagg."

The two were on friendly terms, for Miranda had opportunities of throwing work to the typist. Some of the girls in the adjoining room had hoped to play upon the boards of a London theatre instead of on a writing-machine. From the Thespian heights above they had descended. Only one young lady had ascended. She was still spoken of as the shining exception; and her picture postcard adorned the wall above the instrument she had used.

"One moment, young ladies."

The girls, reading aloud, paused as Miranda took up the telephone. They did not suspect that anything dramatic was taking place, but they eyed Miss Jagg with interest lightened by amusement. To them it was excruciatingly funny to think that the "old dear" had played Juliet.

"I beg your pardon," stammered Miranda.

The telephone had crashed from her trembling fingers onto the desk. The three women—each a bundle of overworked nerves—jumped up, startled out of their wits. Nor did Miranda's white, twisted face serve to calm them.

In answer to three excited exclamations, Miranda answered tremulously: "I have had bad news. Miss Lovell—you remember Miss Lovell who was with me—had to undergo a dreadful operation this morning. I have just heard that she is—dead. She sank quietly of collapse."

The three girls burst into tears. Miranda's eyes were dry.

"I must go upstairs," she said feebly. Nobody noticed that she spoke and moved like an old woman, but the principal accompanied her, whispering a few words of sympathy.

"You are very kind," said Miranda, in the same curiously feeble voice, "but leave me now, please."

She opened the door of the saloon, and went in with her tragic message plain upon her face. Esther rose and ran to her, supporting her to the settee upon which so much comedy had been played. Miranda sank

upon it, stammering out the truth. Esther exclaimed: "I can't believe it! I can't believe it!"

She looked wildly round her, as if entreating the familiar objects to speak, to contradict this outrageous statement. Then she saw the cards, neatly arranged in eight little packets. She pointed at them.

"They lied!"

"No," said Miranda sorrowfully, "I cheated."

To Mrs. Tower, Sabrina had given three letters, to be delivered in the event of her death. The first and longest was addressed to her husband. It is likely that she expressed sincere regret for the blundering marriage in which, you may be sure, she accepted more than half the responsibility. Esther saw Tom at the funeral, a sturdy, gentleman-farmer-looking sort of person (Esther's description), with a red-brown, woodeny face, quite expressionless. Such men are not to be despised or underestimated. Many of them stood shoulder to shoulder when England's greatest battles were fought and won. Pioneers are made out of just such stuff. Undoubtedly he had the phlegmatic temperament of the successful golfer. He followed his wife, dry-eyed, to her grave in the pretty country churchyard where she had expressed a wish to be buried. And he said to Esther:

"She was a good sort, too good for me, but I never understood her—never!"

The pathos of these blunt words moved Esther, not him. She recognised the type, common amongst Englishmen, of the husband who never does or can understand his wife, unless she happens to think precisely

as he does upon matters vital to their unity and mutual happiness. Esther wondered whether he would marry again. Miranda predicted that he would, because he owned a small manor, and must deem it a duty to beget a son and heir. After some years he did marry—his cook—a young, pretty, and quite respectable person.

The second letter reached Miranda upon the evening of the day when Sabrina died. It was very short:

DEAR MIRANDA.—Keep an eye on Esther. With a little help she will learn to stand alone, without it she may tumble down. Do you remember teaching me to walk? Teach her. She wants to run.

Good-bye, my dear old friend, and God bless you!

Yours ever,

SABRINA.

Miranda placed the letter with a sprig of lavender in her desk, amongst other letters which she read from time to time, but she muttered to herself: "If Esther runs, how am I, a waddling old woman, going to catch her?"

The third letter was for Esther. We print it reluctantly because it reveals the side of Sabrina which, during her lifetime, she hid from everybody:

MY DEAREST ESTHER,—Some instinct tells me that I must leave you, at the moment when you most need a friend. Against my will, you made me love you. It is a great power, the greater because exercised unconsciously in your case. Miranda, whom a hard life has turned into rather a selfish old woman, loves you, but not as I do. I go gladly, sorry only because I leave you alone to fight against odds which I can measure and you can't.

I have willed to you my interest in our business. It is worth more than I thought. Not considering a few bad debts, which

I have marked in the ledger with a red cross, you could, if you would, sell out, and find yourself with enough to bring in a small income. But I fear you will not sell out. Nor have you the experience necessary to select an honest partner, cut to my pattern. You will insist on paddling your own canoe, because you are you.

I like the matron of this nursing home, to whom I shall give this letter, and I have spoken to her of you. If you were in dire trouble, you might do worse than go to her. She wouldn't gush, but I have the feeling she might do something. Bear her in mind. Then there is Miranda. Stick to her. She went to Margate on your account. My going will affect her, because she knows how much it will affect you. She is a pagan, but she walks straighter than many a Christian.

I have never spoken much of my life before we met, and it is too late to do so now. The words of a simple little song keep coming into my mind; they were written by a woman, who set them to music:

"Think of me then as one who—much forgiven—
Must needs love much, and fain would love still more.
Think of the rest to one who long has striven
'Gainst wind and tide to reach the farther shore."

Perhaps the farther shore is nearer than we think. I hope so.

Your faithful friend,

SABRINA.

BOOK II

CHAPTER VIII

THE PALADIN'S QUEST

Two years later, our paladin returned to his native land to enjoy a few months' leave before his translation to another sphere, or rather hemisphere, of masterly inactivity. He had been appointed First Secretary at Buenos Ayres.

Lady Matilda, with her tender hand straying amongst his curls, rejoiced because the dear boy had changed so little; but he told her that he was conscious of change within. To her dismay he refused to sleep in Pont Street, although he promised on his honour to lunch there frequently. He took rooms in a snug by-street near Pall Mall and the clubs, to one of the more exclusive of which he had been elected a member.

Three days after his arrival in England he made a discovery which moved him profoundly: *Sabrina et Cie.* had been swept from the Post Office Directory. A complaisant fishmonger furnished crumbs of information. One of the ladies was dead, and the other had been sold up—lock, stock, and barrel. The reason? Harry asked the question fiercely. Bad debts! Thousands of pounds that couldn't be collected from the swells! Miss Yorke—that was the young lady's name—had certainly "gone it a bit." She'd supplied all

the hats—a hundred at least—in that big production at the Calliope Theatre, which came to grief in less than a month. Harry sped to Pont Street, presenting his question as if it were a pistol.

"Where is Esther?"

"What Esther?"

"Good heavens! Esther Yorke!"

"My dear, I've not seen her for an age."

"She's been sold up. Did you know it? You *did?* And not a word to me?"

"I thought it would pain you."

"Did none of you stand by her?"

"I was at Homburg at the time. I bought hats from her although her charges—to an old friend—were certainly excessive."

"Did Dorothea drop her?"

"I have always understood she dropped Dorothea."

"I must find her."

"My son, is that wise?"

The paladin raised his voice to the author of his being.

"I loved her. You know that. I wanted to marry her, although I was torn in two, because I'd promised you to do nothing rash. She hinted with that odd little smile of hers that I'd marked time too long. I told her you'd come round; and she said you'd been round already."

Lady Matilda was frightened, but she stuck to her guns, and fired the biggest of them.

"What Captain Saladin hinted was true. Douglas Yorke never married the mother. She died abroad.

Esther behaved very well; and we did stand by her. We made her little hat shop the fashion. Ask Mrs. Rockingham Trigg. Dear Constance Malplaquet was always buying hats."

"Did Lady Malplaquet pay for them?"

"I suppose so. You are adopting a tone towards me, dear Harry, which hurts me very much."

She gazed at him yearningly, with tears trickling down her cheeks. Harry was touched.

"I beg your pardon," he said contritely. "I dare say she's all right. A dear little girl like that couldn't come to grief. And I ought to have written. But she twitted me once with not carrying out my threats. I put it plainly to her: the last word. Would she chuck me—or the stage? I lost a stone over the job. She refused to marry me five times, and yet she cared. I'll swear she cared, the witch. Five times! It nearly killed me."

"My poor darling!"

"If I hear anything, I'll let you know."

"You are not going before luncheon. I'd ordered the *mousse* you like especially for you."

"You're the best mother in the world."

He stayed to luncheon and commended the *mousse*.

After luncheon the quest began. Harry came of a fox-hunting race, and in the field he rode hard and straight, as his father had ridden, before he began to feel the effects of intemperance in all things. Moreover, Camber Castle, as we know, is in the Quorn country, where there is no pottering, no "craning" at "hairy" fences, no crawling through woodlands.

Harry spoke contemptuously of provincial packs. He hunted Esther in the same spirit with which he settled down in his saddle for a quick thing behind the fastest hounds in the kingdom. But there was no scent beyond the fishmonger's shop. Sabrina was dead, and the *Cie.* had disappeared, engulfed amongst six millions.

When this became certain Harry asked himself a pertinent question: "Shall I go on?" Being an official, he did not question the possibility of finding Esther ultimately. But would it be the sweet alluring creature whom he had known and loved? As a man of the world, he told himself that she, the dimpled nymph, had disappeared for ever. The bloom must have been rubbed off long ago. He had warned her; and in the teeth of his warning she had rushed off to visit Henry FitzRoy.

The name inspired a happy thought. The one and only might know something about her. FitzRoy received him courteously. Yes, he remembered Miss Yorke quite well. He had advised her to try anything except the stage. And he had written a letter of introduction to Johnson, and given the young lady a card for Miranda Jagg.

Next day our paladin presented himself at Miss Jagg's Dramatic School, and asked for a private interview. Miranda did not impress him favourably, but it must be remembered that Harry had never seen her act, or teaching others to act. He perceived an old woman, lamentably untidy, wearing a dressing-gown at four in the afternoon, and carpet slippers. Her

fingers were stained by nicotine; her grey hair was tousled; obviously she had abandoned the wearing of stays. Harry put his first question:

"I am searching for Miss Esther Yorke. Do you know where she is?"

"I do not. I wish I did. She was a great friend of mine."

Harry winced, but he realised that he had been right. Oh, these mummers! This fat old woman the friend of his own girl!!! But, having gone so far, he was the last man to draw back. Not quite hiding his disgust—for Miranda had a keen though slightly congested eye—he entreated details. Miranda stared at him; then she picked up his card, which lay, alas! on the floor amongst such loose company as cigarette ends.

"Good gracious! Are you Harry?"

Mr. Rye admitted, rather stiffly, that his Christian name was Henry.

"Once I asked her if there was a Jack, and she said there had been a Harry. You are he?"

He bowed, unable to speak.

"Sit down! Smoke, if you like. Mr. Rye, if you ever cared for her, I'm your friend. But where on earth have *you* been all this time?"

"At The Hague. I'm in the Diplomatic Service."

"I see." Her beady eyes twinkled. She saw everything, and understood. It speaks volumes for her intelligence when we add that she became sorry for Harry, and overlooked, then and thereafter, the surface fault of superciliousness. And, of course, he was

very handsome, unmistakably a swell. She comprehended in a flash what had once puzzled her: Esther's indifference to the young gentleman of the star class.

"If you cared for her, and if she cared for you—I suppose she did—eh?"

Harry inclined his curly head.

"What separated you?"

"I asked her to marry me five times, Miss Jagg. I did indeed."

His superciliousness dropped from him. The sympathy in Miranda's face and in her incomparable voice was irresistible.

"How could she refuse you?"

He smiled modestly, acknowledging the compliment. It was comforting to reflect that others beside himself were astounded at Esther's uncompromising "No." He found himself accepting one of Miranda's cigarettes and lighting his and hers at the same match. With their heads close together, he added: "I was poor, and my—er—people got at her. She said she would marry me when she had earned her own living. She was a bit—obstinate, you know."

"Right you are! Obstinate as a little mule."

"What has become of her?"

Miranda sighed; the fingers that held the cigarette trembled.

"Sabrina Lovell, her partner, asked me to keep an eye on her. But I'm a fat old woman, as you see. She ran away from me. I couldn't keep up. I tried, Mr. Rye, I did, on my word."

"I'm sure you did," he said in his pleasant voice.

"After Sabrina's death, she went it. You've explained things. She wanted to make money to marry you. That's quite plain—now."

She glanced at Harry maternally, and he told himself that Miranda was the most understanding person he had ever met.

"The poor little dear couldn't stand alone. Sabrina predicted it. A small success turned her head. Then the pendulum swung t'other way. I tried to put a spoke into her wheel. Useless! She was her father's daughter. She sold everything—her pretty furniture, her trinkets, her furs, to keep that shop open; but bad debts swamped her. Then——"

"Yes?"

"She gave up her rooms in Bloomsbury. She lived with me for a bit. I got her an engagement to go on tour. The company bust up. She found herself stranded in Bristol without a farthing."

"Good heavens!"

"I sent her enough money to get back to me; she wrote a letter; you shall see it."

She crossed the big room, unlocked a desk, and took from it a letter. Harry saw that it was written upon cheap paper and with purple ink. And he perceived also that Esther's handwriting had changed, not for the better. He read it, biting his lips:

You Darling Old Thing,—I accept your money, but I won't come back to live on you. I shall turn up with your money in my hand, and then I shall tell you what I think of you. What is in my box is worth five pounds.

Esther.

"I have a box of hers full of clothes, but she never turned up," said Miranda with a gulp. "I advertised. I did what I could. I was very fond of her, Mr. Rye."

"Perhaps she is dead?"

The starch was out of the fine gentleman. His eyes were wet, and when Miranda saw that, she took his hand in hers and patted it.

"I am sure she isn't," she whispered.

"What reason have you for saying that?"

"I'm a superstitious old fool—always was. Don't laugh at me! I knew that Sabrina Lovell would die. One can't explain these things. And I know that Esther is alive."

He groaned out: "It might be better if she were dead."

"She is not dead; but if she ever comes for her box she will have five pounds in her hand."

He went away dazed.

Nor did he recover quickly, although his mother poured oil and wine (the best in her cellar) into his wounds. She saw that he gazed at her with reproach in his blue eyes. Esther's name was never mentioned. Lady Matilda knew that she had disappeared, and in her heart of hearts she may have hoped that the girl was dead. Dead or alive she stood between her boy and marriageable maidens of the right sort, whom he regarded with cold eyes. To maidens of the wrong sort he was said to be less indifferent. He was seen supping at the Savoy with Alice Godolphin, the mimic and dancer. Everybody knew that the lovely Alice was a good girl, but she was not the wife for a future

ambassador. The anxious mother was told that her Harry drank more champagne than is considered necessary to slake an ordinary thirst. He began to lose his attractive youthfulness; his skin became red instead of pink, his eyes less clear.

Was he altogether his father's son? Would he end like him?

Then the unforeseen happened. Harry had employed a private detective to search for Esther. It was the right thing to do, and therefore he did it. Nor did he shrink from possibilities. In his own mind—and conscience—honour compelled him to hunt diligently, not for a wife, but for the woman who might have been his wife. If she had fallen to the depths, he would play his part as becomes an English gentleman. She presented a tremendous claim upon his consideration and his purse, because she was the girl he had loved. This thought was a real solace to him. Always he saw two Esthers: the sacrosanct maid who had made a hero of him, and the headstrong girl who had made that same hero feel uncommonly like an ass. Against the second Esther he bore a grudge. The grudge might be burnt out by heaping coals of fire upon a head once held too high and at the end brought low.

The detective wired to his employer that Esther Yorke was found. The telegram ended with a somewhat peremptory phrase: "Meet me to-night, Black Swan, Southampton."

That night Harry was pledged to attend a gala performance at the Opera. Nevertheless, he travelled to Southampton, trying in vain to analyse his emotions,

unable to determine what he should say or do when Esther and he met. The detective reported curtly:

"I found her ill, almost starving."

"Did you mention my name?"

"I had no such instructions."

"Quite right. How did you find her?"

A memorandum book was produced. Certainly the detective had earned a handsome cheque. He had begun at Bristol. With unerring skill and patience he had hunted through town after town, never losing faith in his ability to run his quarry to ground, dead or alive. When all the details were given, Harry said: "Come back in half an hour. No chance of—of losing her again, is there?"

"She can hardly walk, poor thing!"

The "poor thing" in the mouth of a paid servant hurt horribly.

The half-hour that succeeded was memorable, inasmuch as a duel was fought between a paladin and a First Secretary of Legation. Our diplomatists are very carefully trained nowadays. Peace with honour —that immortal phrase coined by the greatest phrase-maker of his generation—has become slightly shop-worn, although still admittedly serviceable, and honour is not lightly to be defined. Fortunately, everybody knows what peace it; and the peace-at-any-price school enjoys an increasing popularity, particularly with those who have something to lose. The horrors of war have not been, and never can be, exaggerated. With this discursion, let us return to our paladin victorious over the First Secretary. Peace without honour slunk

from the best inn's best room. The First Secretary had been sorely tempted to return to London by the next train, leaving the detective with sufficient money to secure a poor thing from possibility of starvation. Let it never be forgotten that our Harry stayed, well knowing that horrors might confront him.

He went alone to Esther's lodging—a mean house in a mean street. A dreadful woman, leering, bleareyed, gin-sodden, opened the door. Harry entered.

"I want to speak to you alone," he said.

"Right! You're the gent as sent the 'tec?"

He followed her into a room, the more terrible because it seemed to be making some dying, convulsive attempt to appear respectable. In the window hung a card: *Apartments.*

"You are Mrs. Plant?"

"Yus, I'm Mrs. Plant. There's nothink agen me, neither. If lodgers would pay up, I might be askin' yer to sit down in a better chair than that."

"Miss Yorke owes you money?"

"Two pun seventeen."

"Here are three sovereigns. Can I see her?"

"Why not? Walk up! Second floor back. She was a-sittin' by the winder. She'll go to bed early, because light comes expensive."

Harry shuddered.

"Perhaps she will see me here?"

"I dessay. What nyme?"

He hesitated. Suppose she refused to see him? Or if—he paled at the possibility—the mere mention of his name and his presence in such a house drove her to

take that avenue of escape which led through the open window.

"I'll go up," he said. Upon the threshold of the room he turned and put the last question hoarsely:

"What has she been doing to earn a living?"

"Sewin', chiefly—not much o' that. She had a job in one of the big shops. They sacked 'er when 'er 'ealth broke down, poor thing!"

Again that hateful epithet, and this time in the mouth of a drunkard!

Outside her door he hesitated again, but not for long. He pulled himself together, squaring his broad shoulders as he tapped on the rickety panel.

"Come in."

The voice had not changed. He would have recognised it anywhere by reason of its fine quality, but it was attenuated in sound. He opened the door.

"Harry!"

She tottered towards him—a wraith, so thin, so pale, so wretchedly clad that he exclaimed "O God!"

"How did you find me? Why have you come?"

"To take care of you," he answered thickly. He had forgotten that these were the words he had used before; but the woman remembered. Was it possible that he had remained faithful? With a low cry she fell into his arms and fainted. He laid her on the pallet which served as sofa and bed. He put his ear to her bosom. Was she dead?

A doctor was summoned to answer the question.

Within twenty-four hours she was installed in comfortable rooms overlooking the sea, and a trained nurse

was in attendance. There seemed to be a possibility that she might lose her reason, for she remained, apparently, unconscious of the change in her condition, babbling incoherent phrases, bits of poetry which she had learned as a child, and lines out of parts she had played when on tour. Harry sat beside her, called her by name, took her hand; but she stared at him vacantly. When he said "Esther, don't you know me? I'm Harry," she would reply: "Poor Harry! I was fond of Harry once."

Why did she pity—*him?* He understood plainly enough that the adjective qualified the Harry she had known, not the First Secretary of Legation.

The landlady of the lodgings by the sea, the nurse, and the doctor knew him as Mr. Browne. Asked suddenly for a name, he had, on an impulse, given a false one. The landlady may have suspected this; but his insistence on the final "e" put to flight unworthy suspicions. A ready wit is almost as good as ready money. And the lodgings were paid for in advance. Then he returned to town.

It is significant that he did not communicate with Miranda. The disposition to mark time had become a habit with him. As a diplomat he had learned to put off till to-morrow what need not be done to-day.

At the end of a fortnight the doctor said, when Harry ran down from London to see Esther:

"Have you noticed the change in her looks?"

"Yes."

"She drinks milk like a baby, quarts of it. The

body has responded to my treatment, but the mind is less amenable. How pretty she is!"

"Yes," said Harry.

"If I were you, I should take her abroad. Preferably, to France. A complete change may work wonders and can do no harm."

"I'll think it over."

"It's so easy; the boat for Havre leaves every night at twelve."

The suggestion ripened in his mind. In France no awkward questions were asked. He would be able to devote himself to the task of nursing Esther without encountering raised eyebrows and sly smiles. Already he excited curiosity. At any moment he might meet a friend, when he was walking beside Esther's bath chair, for this gentle form of exercise had been prescribed.

Esther had come to recognise him as a faithful attendant. She called him Mr. Browne, withholding the familiar Harry. She had the same smile for him, for the doctor, and for the nurse.

"How kind you all are!" she said.

He had kissed her hand, lying thin and passive in his own. She made no attempt to withdraw it. Had he kissed her lips, she would have smiled and said "Thank you."

CHAPTER IX

THE PLEASANT LAND OF FRANCE

FURTIVELY—one dislikes to use such a word, but the truth must be told—our paladin slipped over to France and made a reconnaissance. By the luck of things he found a charming châlet overlooking the Seine, not far from Rouen, where he consulted a doctor, who expressed lively interest in the case, and promised to secure a nurse. His English *confrére* had great right! Complete change of scene was to be commended. When would Madame arrive? Our paladin blushed, explaining that Madame was Mademoiselle; he thought he detected a twinkle in the doctor's eye.

"I regard her as my sister," he said austerely.

"Perfectly," said the doctor with equal sobriety.

"She was to have been my wife, Monsieur le docteur." The Frenchman bowed profoundly. "I tell you this in confidence. She is ill and friendless. I have come to your charming country because in England my motives are likely to be misunderstood."

The doctor bowed again. Might he be allowed to compliment Monsieur upon his accent and his admirable powers of expression? Also Monsieur was a man of heart.

Our Harry unbent. He did speak French very well, and this little doctor was as understanding a person as Miranda Jagg.

A man of heart!

The phrase warmed him to the core. He had given up first-class cricket, although he wore the Zingari riband round his panama hat. Yes—he had a heart and—and—*viscera!!* The world, his world, would laugh if they could see him playing nurse to a waif who had lost everything, including her memory; but this little Frenchman understood and bowed. It may have occurred to him that gentlemen of like kidney had fought at Crecy and Agincourt. From such foes one might accept defeat without a sense of humiliation. At the moment, too, the Channel Squadron was being entertained at Brest. The *entente cordiale* had been established.

He took the châlet overlooking the Seine, engaged a couple of stout, rosy-cheeked Norman girls, added a few articles of furniture, and returned to Southampton.

Esther's mental condition remained the same, but the terrible lines were fading out of her face. She greeted Mr. Browne with sweet effusion; evidently she had missed him. Alone with her he whispered his plans. She clapped hands like a child.

"France! How lovely! How kind you are, Mr. Browne!"

"I wish you would call me Harry, dear."

She regarded him seriously, a puzzled light in her hazel eyes.

"Oh, I couldn't. I knew a Harry. Poor fellow! I couldn't call anybody else Harry. You mustn't ask me."

"You would like to come to France with me?"

"I should simply love it."

Her hand slipped into his.

The journey was accomplished easily. The English nurse accompanied her patient as far as Havre, where she was met by the French nurse and doctor. That evening they reached the châlet. It was called Mont Plaisir. And it had a history. A French artist had built it for the woman he loved. And here man and wife had lived tranquilly and happily for some three years, during which time the man's best work had been accomplished. Then fame and fortune lured him to Paris; and from that moment the fickle goddesses turned their backs on him. The poor fellow lost wife and health, and all appetite for work. The little doctor, who told the tale to our paladin, had seen him in Montmartre sipping absinthe, a scarecrow, haggard, ragged, indifferent to present or future, forever gazing, with lacklustre eyes, into the mists of the past!

The garden which encompassed the châlet was charming. Roses in wildest profusion bordered a terrace. A big chestnut tree overshadowed a small lawn. Beyond was an orchard with its crop of apples yet ungathered. In the early morning and evening one could smell the apples. From the terrace the ground, broken by moss-covered rocks, sloped sharply to the river. And of course there was a fountain, a miniature affair, but made of fine stone delicately carved: a *trouvaille* of the artist, who had found it in the courtyard of some ruined Renaissance château. From the mouth of Time, a bearded sage who supported a sun-dial, spouted a

jet of clearest water, the bubbling moments of life tinkling melodiously as they splashed into the basin beneath, and overflowing in a tiny rivulet which trickled through the rocks to the river, and thence to the sea.

Esther's delight in the cottage, the fountain, the view of the river, the spires of Rouen, the rosy-cheeked handmaidens, was pleasant to behold. She slept like a baby. Our Harry slept well also, wondering, as he laid his curly head upon his pillow, how many men of his upbringing would have risen adequately to such an occasion.

We pass over two sunny weeks. Lady Matilda knew that her boy was abroad, and that letters addressed Poste Restante, Rouen, would reach him. When he disappeared from London, she wondered whether Miss Alice Godolphin would continue dancing at the Terpsichore Theatre. She did. She danced every night of the month that Harry was in France. Balm, this, to a fond and anxious mamma!

At the end of the fortnight Esther had become the counterfeit presentment of his own girl, whom he had never expected to see again in the flesh. And in a subtle, inexplicable way, our paladin was sensible that he had regained his youth. The simple life agreed with him vastly well. Except when engaged in field sports, he had always been of a slightly indolent disposition. He liked to take things easy. The Hague, dear sleepy town, suited him. Buenos Ayres, the land of *mañana*, would suit him even better, if his Chief were the right sort.

He read aloud to Esther; he spent hours with her

upon the river; no brother could have been more devoted to a sister.

She called him "Brownie."

But he never looked at her without reflecting that he had found her in a slum. Four years of her life were a sealed book! That she had lost reason at sight of him was a fact pregnant with horror. In her hollowed cheeks, before they were filled out by the good Normandy fare, he visualised nightmare imaginings.

The little doctor began to shake his head. Mademoiselle might not find her memory. He cited cases. To all intents and purposes the Bon Dieu had assigned a new lease of life without reference to the old one. Certainly, she was of the most reasonable. It would be idiotic, impertinent, to describe her as insane. Physiologists would say that Mademoiselle exhibited an interesting illustration of double consciousness with a complete break between the past and the present.

With a bitter-sweet shock, our Harry realised that he had become an object of supreme interest to her. In his absence the nurse remarked that she seemed unhappy and irritable. With him, alone or in company, she was as gay and joyous as a child. Half of his leave had expired; in three months he must set sail for the Argentine. What then?

One day he spoke of Miranda, of Sabrina, of her life in Palace Gardens. She listened attentively, with a puzzled, piteous expression.

"You make my head ache," she said, and burst into tears.

He kissed away the tears, soothing her gently. Was

this taking advantage of a helpless girl? By no means. She was his dear little sister; she expected brotherly kisses from Brownie and she received them.

To describe our paladin as gently stewing in his own juice is, perhaps, a vulgar metaphor, but it expresses the condition of affairs. Harry simmered, sometimes with satisfaction, often with apprehension, and Miranda—had she been in the kitchen—would have exclaimed: "Here's a pretty kettle of fish!"

It is too painful to speculate upon what would have happened had Esther not recovered her memory, which came back, as it had gone, quite suddenly, and from the same cause: a shock. Harry and she were drifting down the river, when a boat ran into them, bow on, striking them amidships. Harry dragged an insensible woman to the bank. For the second time he thought she was dead: animation seemed to be suspended. She struggled back to life in her pretty room at the cottage, and opened her eyes to recognise Harry.

"Where am I?" she asked feebly.

"I'm taking care of you," he answered eagerly. "Don't worry."

"But I can't understand——"

"You mustn't try to understand yet. Lie quiet! You have been ill."

She stared at him with dilating pupils. Then she saw her own hand, and gasped out:

"Harry, that is not my hand."

"Of course it is."

"How funny! It's the hand I used to have."

He remembered the hands outstretched towards him

in that mean lodging. They were claw-like, with needle-marks upon them.

"Esther, you've been ill for weeks, and now you're well. But, for Heaven's sake, keep quiet!"

The doctor administered morphia, and she slept for nearly twelve hours, while our paladin wondered what he should say to her when she woke up.

When they met, next day, his task was not made any the easier by the discovery that she had not the slightest remembrance of anything which had taken place since her first seizure, while everything preceding it had become perfectly clear.

He explained, with admirable modesty, what he had done. She listened, the colour ebbing and flowing in her cheeks. Surprise feebly expresses her emotions. She was astounded and confounded, for she had seen herself in the glass before she joined him in the garden, and the nurse, you may be sure, had prattled enthusiastically of Monsieur's devotion and patience. Indeed, the doctor and she—romantic souls, both—had exchanged a word or two. Monsieur would marry his so sweet young Mees! What a story! What an ending, O mon Dieu!

They sat side by side on the little rose-embowered terrace overlooking the Seine. The sun shone delicately through a lavender-grey haze: upon the water-meadows below a row of poplars cast translucent shadows where the cows were lying down: the river reflected the mother-of-pearl tints of the sky.

"Does anybody know?" she asked.

"Not a soul. I thought of telling Miranda Jagg.

Perhaps I ought to have done so. But I felt that even she might misapprehend my motives. And so I —well, I marked time."

The old expression struck her. She looked at him more critically.

"Harry, why have you done all this for me?"

"Why? My dear girl, what a question!"

"A very natural one, I think."

"What sort of man do you suppose I am? I came back from The Hague to find you vanished. I simply had to find the woman I had asked to become my wife."

"I see," she said quietly.

"There is a fairly decent inn near here. I shall put up there till other arrangements can be made."

"Why should you go?"

"I have been taking care of a child, not a young woman."

To cover an awkward moment, he picked a rose, and fastened it into her dress.

"You bought me clothes?"

"The English nurse attended to that. Not a bad sort, but a gossip. The doctor suggested my bringing you here."

"You are wonderful!"

She tried to compute her debt to him, and failed. How could she repay him?"

"We shall have *déjeuner* together, out here, under the chestnut tree, as usual."

"As usual?"

"We have always breakfasted and dined under that tree."

She passed the hand he had given back to her across her forehead.

"It is a dream, Harry, a dream. And I remember nothing?"

"Nothing. You were a jolly little kid. We had great larks together."

"I almost wish I had not woke up."

"Esther," he said in a low voice, "you are not strong yet. Please let things go on for a bit just as they are. You will do this, my dear, won't you?"

She answered "Yes," with a tender sparkle in her eyes.

He noticed then and afterwards that her instant acceptance was meek. The burden of poverty, of a compulsory dependence upon others, the habit of obedience ground into her when she was a shop girl—these had crushed her spirit. She looked at Harry with a piteous little smile upon her face, slightly deprecating, slightly derisive, which seemed to say: "Your word is law. Who am I, *now*, that I should impose my wishes or desires upon anybody?"

Argentine, one of the rosy-cheeked girls, came out to lay the cloth for the mid-day meal. She brought long crisp rolls, golden butter, and cyder in glass decanters. From the kitchen, hard by, was wafted the fragrance of a cunningly-compounded *ragout*.

"How hungry I am!" said Esther. Then she added seriously: "And for six months I have not had a decent meal that I can remember."

Argentine beamed as she handed the omelette to

the *beau* Monsieur, and entreated Mademoiselle to try the good cyder.

"*Quelle bonne sauce, l'amour!*" Argentine said to Babette, who was mixing the salad.

"*Qui fait le monde à la ronde,*" quoted Babette.

For a few days Esther accepted gratefully the sunshine, the good food, the clean clothes. In a word, she gloated. But dominating every sense was the astounding revelation of our paladin's loyalty and fidelity. The passion for these comes to most of us with advancing years, when, too late, alas! we may realise, with what poignant self-reproach, that such transcendent qualities have not been appreciated or even apprehended. Esther, after the loss of father and fortune, had seen more than one old acquaintance suddenly afflicted with short sight when she approached. But Harry had remained faithful!

Our paladin stuck to his resolution of sleeping at the inn: an observance of the proprieties warmly approved by the little doctor, who himself, so he said, was of the most respectable. But very soon, Esther asked herself whither the primrose path was leading. Her forehead puckered distressfully whenever she thought of the future. Was Harry still her Harry? Being a paladin he held his tongue. A weaker or a stronger man might have said: "Tell me everything. Has the worst that can happen to a woman happened to you? If so, as true friends, let's face even that together."

The worst, let us hasten to say, had not happened. Esther had been on the brink of the precipice more

than once. Importunity had almost beguiled her. Sometimes she wondered how she had escaped. What power had sustained her when the darkness encompassed her, when hunger tore at her vitals? At such awful moments she had thought of Sabrina—Sabrina who had starved, making the farther shore 'gainst wind and tide.

She could read interrogation in Harry's blue eyes.

Did he love her still? Did she love him? Can women ask themselves such questions? Do they not always know? She divined that he loved her, but she could not measure his love. Estimated by what he had done, it seemed deep as the sea, high as heaven. Yes: he loved her, and he stood, the hero at last, upon the apex of the world's pyramid of true lovers, high above her. In her humility she grovelled at the base.

Did she love him?

The cruel question obsessed her, for, admittedly, she was in love with love, enchanted with kind looks, words, and actions, the *petits soins* which have held thousands of sweet women bond to men unworthy of them. This feeling, so strong that she feared to analyse it, was sexless. If a woman had befriended her she would have thrilled with the same immeasurable gratitude and satisfaction; but this fact, we may well believe, she had not yet grasped. Harry, as a youth, she had once loved: her first love. Surely she must still love the man grown to mighty stature who loved her. You must remember that it was not possible for her to know what is plain to us. Impulsive, free from vanity and self-consciousness, how could she conceive of her Harry

posing, like a model, for the mere gratification of saying to himself: "Behold, I am not as other publicans and sinners"?

No: he had rushed hot-foot upon her trail because he loved her.

Outwardly, she behaved with charming grace and gratitude. They made excursions to Dreux and Evreux and Chartres, and listening to her he could scarce believe that this was not his own girl of Palace Gardens, only wiser, riper, and a more entertaining companion. Life without her, even in a lotus land, began to appear a desert. He wondered why he had found Alice Godolphin so amusing, not recollecting that the dancer had danced her way into his fancy to the good old tune set by flattery. She had told him, upon the first night they met, that he was the best-looking man in town and "Awfully clever, I'm sure!"

Esther flattered him also, quite unconsciously. Abased, she looked up with a tender gleam in her eyes which set our paladin ablaze.

"God help me! I love her more than ever!"

The exclamation broke from a tortured First Secretary of Legation alarmed by the new and bewildering character of his own sensations.

After dinner they sat together upon the terrace overlooking the river, listening to the tinkle of the fountain and the soft voices of the night. They talked little, but each was conscious of the sweet intimacy, the penetrating charm, which darkness quickens. Twice Harry took Esther's hand in his. But he refrained from kissing it! At his touch the siren trembled. By the

light of the stars he caught a glimpse of a heaving bosom.

"If life could always flow on like this," she murmured.

At that, fearing to be too rash, unable to reply with a phrase which would satisfy the exigencies of an enchanting moment and at the same time not arouse expectations which a chivalrous gentleman might not be able to satisfy, our paladin had replied with, we fear, banality:

"It's getting rather chilly. Perhaps we ought to go indoors."

Next morning she blushed when he appeared, and for the first time exhibited constraint in his presence and a nervousness which he divined he alone could put to flight. He said boldly: "I slept badly," and she replied: "So did I." Then they sighed. Each dreaded speech, and yet silence maddened him. For Esther saw how it was with him and knew that she could pay her debt to her lover: every shilling in the pound, and compound interest beside!

He, for his part, while shaving that morning, had almost made up his mind to plunge blindly into honourable marriage. No man of his acquaintance—except, possibly, the friend in the Foreign Office spoken of already as a love-in-a-cottage simpleton—would so plunge. The very word indicated a descent. And he might be leaping head first into horrors. By this time it was obvious that Esther would sooner talk of anything under the sun and stars rather than those years which lay like a pea-soup fog between them. She had

prattled gaily enough of some of her experiences in the hat shop—experiences at which our paladin had—well—sniffed. Not that the sniff was audible, but his nose—such a nice straight nose!—had been cocked at a higher angle. A stranger might have suspected that something was wrong with the drains. And he said with muffled indignation:

"That you should have gone through this!"

"But I liked it, Harry. It was great fun, really."

"Fun?" He strangled a snort.

"Yes, fun. I learned a lot."

"No doubt. If you had married me——! Five times I asked you. And when I was at Eton I used to say that I'd never ask a woman twice: I did indeed."

"Eton boys put on too much side. If I had married you, Harry, where would you have been to-day? First Secretary at Buenos Ayres? I think not. Would your uncle have increased your allowance? Not he!"

"I told you once that money is not everything."

"I'm ashamed to say that I accepted the statement with salt. You are a paladin."

He smiled and stroked his moustache. At last the scales were falling from her pretty eyes.

"Money or no money, I wanted you."

"I was not quite fair to you."

And then, swiftly, she had changed the subject. And afterwards, during the pleasant days that followed, she had seemed to know that the time had not come for the last word, and that such a time must be fixed by him.

When would that time come?

They had breakfasted together as usual, but Babette shook her head when her dishes returned to the kitchen. Name of a dog! What was the matter? Had Monsieur quarrelled with his so charming Mees?

Two days before, the trained nurse had bidden Esther good-bye. Before she went, she said with an illuminating smile: "I shall assist at the wedding, Mademoiselle, if it takes place here."

"The wedding?"

"Ah, Mademoiselle, we have all rejoiced. Monsieur is *très correct, hein?* But when you were ill——! *Oh —là—là!*"

"What do you mean?"

"He was not ashamed, even before us, to show how he adored you. And always, you were miserable if he was away. And morning and evening you embrace him."

"Good gracious!"

"You sit yourself on his knee."

"I sit myself on his——!"

"And you call him 'Brownie.'"

"I have behaved like a child, and he treated me as such."

"Never, never in my life, have I seen so pretty and so sad a sight as you, Mademoiselle, on Monsieur's knee!"

"Evidently I looked upon Monsieur as my father."

"That, alas! jumped to the eyes. But Monsieur, he look at you, Mademoiselle, as if you were a peach that he was forbidden to eat. The forbidden fruit—*hein?*"

Esther blushed, laughed, and kissed her nurse on both cheeks. After this confidential talk, and its bewildering revelations, she told herself that surely she did love Harry, because she had acclaimed him as her own when her poor wits wandered away.

They spent the next day or two in that dear sweet country, well-named by our neighbours *le pays du tendre*, through which meanders the gentle stream of Courtship. Of its pure waters Esther drank deep, her paladin holding out the chalice, and refilling it twenty times a day. She saw him at his best, the *preux chevalier* on his knees before his lady, the very perfect knight, a Galahad. It seemed to be his will to treat her with a respect, a veneration, a delicacy absolutely enchanting. She told him again and again that he was "wonderful." Honestly, without a scintilla of doubt, he believed it, for he had almost made up his mind to marry her. Something had to be accomplished first—an interview with his uncle—but he regarded Esther as his future wife.

Why did he not tell her so, and have done with it?

It is not easy to reply. Your procrastinator will let the heavens fall rather than deny himself the darling luxury of anticipation. Our Harry fell asleep smiling, and dreamed of the glow on Esther's face when her god stood revealed in all his glory; and the interview with Lord Camber, if successfully accomplished, would be the crown of his high enterprise. Unhappily, he did not think of her, nor compute what suspense might be to a woman of her character and temperament.

An incident, very trifling in itself, presented our paladin in a less kind light. Babette wished to know if her service as cook would be required during the winter. A situation in Rouen had been offered. What should she say?

"One must think of the winter, we others."

The "we" pierced, not to mention the preceding words. Esther shivered, thinking of the snow and hail. Ah, yes, it behoved all women to think of, to provide against—the winter. Knowing that Harry's leave would expire in November, she was about to answer that most assuredly Babette's services would not be wanted after that month. But she had been trained in a school where no understrapper dares answer for a superior. As a shop girl in the Great Emporium, at Southampton, the necessity of referring the most simple question to a paragon in a frock coat had been scourged into her.

"I will speak to Monsieur," she replied.

"I should like to cook for Mademoiselle for ever and ever. Mademoiselle comprehends that?"

Esther kissed her rosy cheeks.

"What nice people there are in the world," she said.

In the tiny garden, under the chestnut tree, her Harry lay asleep upon his *chaise longue*. Esther looked at him; and a slight frown wrinkled her forehead, bringing out the cruel lines which good food and kind words had almost but not quite smoothed away. The book he had been reading, a French novel by Loti, had slipped from his relaxed hand to the ground. His head, tilted backward, as slightly on one side: the

mouth was open: the chin had retreated an inch or two. After an excellent *déjeuner*, in a warm, soporific air, he slumbered sweetly, as a plump, pink baby slumbers after its mid-day bottle.

She examined him attentively.

The lower lip, she decided, was too full; but the upper had been finely cut; the chin left something to be desired, a less rounded contour, a sharper angle. Time might turn it into a jowl. And his curls, a thought too luxuriant, masked a brow not cast in the heroic mould.

She realised, with a shock, that she was criticising him, and not too favourably, and that, unconsciously, she had been trying to see him as he might be ten years hence. How disloyal!

She touched his forehead with her hand, and he awoke.

"Babette wishes to know if you will need her after November."

"Bother Babette! What a drowsy afternoon!"

"You see, she must think of the winter."

"Shall we walk, or go on the river, or sit here?"

"Babette wants an answer at once."

"Servants are so inconsiderate. I do not choose to give her an answer at once. If she wants to leave, I dare say we can find another cook."

"Oh, no. She would like, so she says, to cook for us for ever and ever."

"Tell her not to play the fool."

"But—the winter?"

"Good heavens! Am I the sort of man to let a servant suffer?"

"No." She sat down beside him, and took his hand.

"I may keep on this house," he added.

What was she to infer from this? The colour flowed into her cheeks as she murmured:

"Harry, dear, you have said nothing to me of your plans."

"Perhaps my plans are not quite in shape."

Something in his tone, an inflection of reproach, of displeasure or disappointment, made her withdraw her hand. He saw shadows on her face and frowned. When he spoke again his words had a distinctly sub-acid flavour.

"My dear girl, can't you trust me?"

"Ye—es."

"Without trust—er—where are we? Have I done anything to make you distrust me?"

She remained silent.

"Perfect friendship—and—er—perfect trust are about the same thing, eh?"

He did not express himself well. What public-school man does? To talk like a book, in the opinion of his world, was to talk like a damned prig. He expressed himself better in French. This gives furiously to think, as our friends and allies say.

"Yes," said Esther slowly, "perfect friendship and perfect trust walk hand in hand. If they are not the same thing they are twins."

"Then why do you ask about my plans?"

She said no more.

How could she retort: "I am to trust you, but you don't trust me. If you love me, if you think I love

you, have I not the right to help in this shaping of plans? It is cruel, unjust, to leave me in the dark."

Bitter experience had taught her that most men exact from women a trust which they are not willing to bestow in return. Her father had never trusted her. Had he done so, she might have stayed his hand when it reached for the pistol. Douglas Yorke had gambled away her future and his own, risking all upon a last throw. A word to her, and the catastrophe might have been averted. Her father had never really loved her, because that word was withheld.

From that instant, maybe, dated a reaction, against which she struggled helplessly. Sabrina had said years before—how long ago it seemed!—that Harry must not play the hero intermittently. Sabrina meant, of course, that he must not play the hero at all, being an amateur, and as such despised by the professional. But surely Sabrina would have admitted that what he had done during the past six weeks was heroic—the real thing? His chivalrous care of her had not been intermittent. Nevertheless, now he was weighing *pros* and *cons*, counting the cost, marking time. If he had been really adventurous, the true paladin of romance, how she could adore him!

That afternoon he said abruptly: "I'm going to leave you for a few days. You won't mind?"

"Oh, no." The words slipped out naturally. She wanted to be alone for a few days, so as to adjust her view of him, now out of focus. For a week he had filled the world.

"You said that as if you wanted me to go."

"Harry!"

"Your face brightened: I swear it did."

"How absurd you are!"

"That is the one thing I am not, thank the Lord! Absurd? I detest absurd people. And I like to know exactly where I am. I have some business in town, but I feared you would miss me most awfully if I left you alone."

"Of course I shall miss you."

"Do you know that when you were ill, you couldn't bear me to stay away more than an hour at the most?"

"So the nurse told me. It was very funny."

"What odd words you use! I don't see that it was funny."

"And I sat on your knee, and embraced you, morning and evening, *un bon bécot familial*, and called you 'Brownie.'"

She laughed to hide a deeper feeling, but he could not perceive that.

"I'm glad you're amused," he said stiffly.

Next day at noon, he departed, and she was left alone with her thoughts. She passed the first few hours in a reverie, inhaling the delicious air, so sparkling and yet so soft, giving herself up to the enchanting present. The weather was perfect. Around her, Mother Earth seemed to be resting after the travail of harvest. The leaves were turning, but not quite ready to fall. After the first frost the ground would be strewn with them. There was no wind, but towards evening a breeze floated up the river, bringing with it the sublimated note of a distant bell. Esther sat under the chestnut

tree, gazing into the rose-coloured haze out of which soared the spires of Rouen, contrasting this sweet scene with the slum from which a paladin had haled her, hearing the shrilling of the crickets and the croaking of the frogs in the water-meadows. In the fields behind the cottage, some peasants were singing, and below, a barefooted *gardeuse de vaches* was driving home her kine.

Beyond this paradise seethed and simmered the world that works and starves. Esther asked herself with profound melancholy, whether she could go back to the crowd: the struggling myriads who had trampled upon her underfoot. Life, as she had found it, appeared atrocious, intolerable, impossible. And then suddenly, out of the shadows of the past, with a faint smile upon her lips, came a mental vision of Sabrina. At such moments, Esther shuddered. Her friend seemed to be very near her, clothed in the samite of a guardian angel. Sabrina had fought against wind and tide, and had gained—rest. And now to Esther had been vouchsafed rest. But between this rest and herself stood her friend, with uplifted finger, bidding her pause and consider. So Sabrina had stood, in the Southampton slum, between a weary, desperate woman and the oblivion to be achieved by a leap from a window or a plunge into the river.

Esther closed her eyes, knowing that a grim struggle confronted her, and that she must choose, now, between the conflicting claims of the flesh and the spirit.

CHAPTER X

THE PALADIN PERCEIVES THAT VIRTUE MAY BRING ITS OWN REWARD

Lord Camber's town house was in Grosvenor Square. When he became engaged to the lady whom our paladin had once described as "designing," it had been put in order and redecorated. But the man who owned it, and so much more beside, cared little for entertaining, and his wife cared even less. Before his marriage he had been famous as a yachtsman, owning always the most up-to-date racing machine and, in addition, a large, comfortable ocean-going steamer, the *Albatross*. After his marriage he gave up racing, but he spent two or three months each year cruising in little-known waters; and his wife was as fond of salt water as he. He held a master's certificate, and was accounted a navigator.

We may as well admit that he had never held his nephew in very high esteem. Lady Matilda considered this amazing. It was one of many things which the dear lady could not understand. Of course poor Camber was admittedly odd. He had loose notions about public-school education, for instance; he could not be described as a "sound" Conservative; he thought too much time was wasted in playing cricket; and he had said in public that, in his opinion, the British Empire was quite large enough. To whom much is given much

is forgiven, but Mrs. Rockingham Trigg echoed the opinion of a large circle of acquaintance when she said it was a pity that such a man possessed forty thousand a year.

Our paladin had shared this view ever since he was breeched. In his uncle's presence he was sensible of immeasurable differences. Fortunately, each liked fox-hunting. When together they talked amicably enough about horses and hounds.

The butler, upon whose back Harry had ridden when he was a boy of five, ushered our hero into his uncle's den, the only room in the house not "done up." Another example of eccentricity! Den it was and always had been, filled with what Lady Matilda called rubbish: dreadfully dull books and pamphlets upon estate management, municipal economy, poor laws, and charity organisation, photographs of people one never met, thank God! hideous curios from outlandish countries, and innumerable battered pipes.

"Glad to see you, my boy. Sit down, fill your pipe, and tell me all about yourself."

Harry did not smoke a pipe in London, but he had wit enough not to say so. He produced a gold cigarette case, at the sight of which his uncle's eyes twinkled.

"Gold—or rolled?" he inquired.

"Gold," said Harry, stiffly. He looked about for a match. Lord Camber pulled out a penny box from a pocket of a disgraceful tweed coat.

"Catch!"

Harry lit his cigarette, and wondered why his uncle's

manners were so very bourgeois. He stared at one like a tinker.

"You look uncommonly well, Harry. Been out at grass, eh?"

"I have been in France."

"So your mother told me. Wonderful woman, that! Evergreen!"

"How are the twins?"

"Going strong."

"You have been very good to me, uncle."

"Tut, tut."

"You allow me a thousand a year now."

"And this new billet means an extra five hundred, eh? And no incumbrances"—he glanced sharply at his nephew—"no one but yourself to spend it on. Lucky dog! You're better off than I am. Never had a gold cigarette case in my life."

"It was given to me," said Harry, conscious that he had rather overdressed his part. He was looking very spick and span indeed.

"I'm thinking of getting married, uncle."

"Ah!"

"To a young lady of whom you have heard, and of whom possibly you may disapprove as—as a wife for me."

Lord Camber's eyes no longer twinkled. He had heard of Miss Godolphin, and, in fact, had seen her dance.

"Why do you think I should disapprove of this—er—young lady?"

"My mother hinted as much."

"You have spoken to your mother?"

"Not yet."

"I'm rather a duffer at catching thoughts on the fly."

"My mother gave me to understand, when I went to The Hague, that you had increased my allowance because—well, because I was *not* marrying her."

"God bless my soul! Are you speaking of Esther Yorke?"

"Have I said anything extraordinary?"

His uncle laughed.

"My dear fellow, there seems to be a misapprehension somewhere. Your mother, years ago, told me that she had the most charming girl in England staked out for you. Not her words—mine. I met the young lady, and I thought your mother was quite right. Miss Yorke struck me as being a really good sort, quite captivating. Then came her father's smash. I'm going to be frank with you, Harry. I did you an injustice. I thought that the smash would choke you off. It seems that it didn't. You asked her to marry you against your mother's wish and knowing the worst. It was handsomely done, sir."

Harry lifted his head. Beneath his smart waistcoat his chest expanded a couple of inches.

"It was handsomely done," repeated this extraordinary man, "and I beg your pardon for thinking you were incapable of doing it. When I heard that she had refused you I was deuced sorry—and, well, I increased your allowance because I thought that Miss Yorke might have said 'No' because she knew—as

well as I did—that with your tastes marriage on seven hundred a year must be a bit of an experiment. Your mother seems to have grasped the wrong end of the stick."

Harry wiped his forehead.

"Now go on, my boy."

Harry went on. We know what he said, but it is not easy to convey the way he said it. His modest recital of his quest for the girl who had disappeared; his somewhat halting utterance, throwing into vivid relief the "tryer" and "thruster," as contrasted with the mere phrase-maker; his blushes when he mentioned his retirement to the inn; his final "now I mean to marry her," produced a prodigious effect. Lord Camber sat staring at his nephew, with his eyes nearly popping from his head. When the last word was out he jumped up and seized the hand of the paladin.

"You've given me the surprise of my life," he spluttered. "'Pon my soul, I'm proud of you. I'm ashamed to think that we're, comparatively speaking, strangers. Marry her? You shall marry her from this house, and I'll give her away. The Missus will want to hug you. She doesn't know you, Harry, and I don't think you know her. But she's thoroughbred. By Jove! I've let my pipe go out!"

At this moment the wonderful thought came to Harry that virtue is rewarded in this world—sometimes!

He stayed to luncheon, and, metaphorically speaking, Lady Camber did hug him. And throughout a meal which might have been much better cooked and

served he was conscious that his uncle's eyes rested upon him with affection and admiration. Afterwards a business word was spoken which warmed the heart even more than the old brandy which the butler forgot to bring in.

"I'm going round the world in the yacht, and we start in three weeks. Can your young woman get ready before that? You think so, eh? I don't doubt it. And your leave will be up in November. You're not thinking of chucking your profession? No; quite right. Before I leave England I shall settle two thousand a year on you. The twins made your nose rather sore, eh? But it's straight enough now. And I shall make it my particular business that you don't stick too long in Buenos Ayres. They" (unmentionable influential personages were indicated) "owe me something."

That night Harry dined alone in one of the smart restaurants; and he felt justified in doing himself rather well. The room, too florid in its French scheme of decoration, was lined with pink brocade specially designed to enhance the charms of the fair women and brave men who sat at meat. At convenient intervals were mirrors. A cavalier too well bred to stare at a sparkler might contemplate *à discrétion* the scintillating image in the glass. In late September most of the sparklers were sparkling in country houses, but Harry was the better able to look at himself. He did so with dignity, not shrinking the ordeal. Long ago, when he was a child of five, his nurse had held him up to gaze into a convex mirror. "Whose ugly little face is that?" she had asked; and the urchin responded in-

stantly, "Yours." An unconscious humorist at five! He might have dined in Grosvenor Square; but, apart from the bad cooking, he was modest enough to feel the necessity of stepping from his pedestal, of unbending, of taking off his shining armour. There are moments when the righteous do feel that their righteousness is indeed a "filthy rag."

After dinner he intended to look in at one of the halls—not the one where Miss Godolphin was dancing; but the dinner was so good, and the wine so insidiously exhilarating, that only those who dwell in Scotch manses will dare to throw a stone at him for changing his mind at the last instant. All said and done, the head waiter was more to blame than our paladin. That great man, commanded to secure a stall at the Empire or Alhambra, had hurried from the telephone to whisper that a seat half-way down the gangway was available at the Terpsichore. "I secured it, sir," he added.

"Quite right," replied our Harry. As he sipped his coffee he reflected that he need not "go round" afterwards. Alice would never see him through the blazing footlights, and without doubt she was supping with one of her innumerable "boys." He intended to be snug in bed by midnight. On the morrow he would travel down to the country house where Lady Matilda was staying and break the news to her. He meant to have a bit of a game with the little mater. She had not quite played cricket. Not that he bore her malice. Thank the Lord! he was able to see things from the other fellow's point of view; but, all the same, the little Mumsie must be made to sit up.

Halfway through the performance at the Terpsichore a note was brought to him by an attendant:

Are we back from our travels? Please come and talk about them with—ALICE.

Only a churl could have refused such an invitation. Alice was a good little girl, and she would understand. He would tell her the truth; it might surprise her. Like most women of her class she was inclined to hold men too cheap. Somebody, an attendant probably, had mentioned that he was in the theatre, for her turn had not yet begun. After it was over he would slip round for a minute.

Alice came on five minutes later. She was famous as a mimic and a dancer, and—good. The adjective is inclusive. She had earned it deservedly when she served her apprenticeship at the Jollity Theatre, where there is no room for the mothers and aunts of choristers. Of these unchaperoned young ladies half at least are good, and half are not. With those who are not, we have, happily, no concern. Our paladin would not have been seen supping at the Savoy with a chorister of the baser sort, even if she were possessed of the beauty of Venus and the wit of Minerva. He had been attracted towards Alice because she was unquestionably good as well as pretty. She and others like her, animated possibly with a desire to provide respectable wives and mothers for the Peerage, adopted one golden rule: they accepted from their friends everything that might be offered—trinkets, hats, dresses, motor-cars, and the best food in London—and they gave absolutely

nothing in return except thanks and conversation. The choristers who were not good spoke derisively of the golden rule.

'Alice lived with her parents—Mr. and Mrs. Snelling—at Clapham. When her salary was raised from two guineas a week to twenty she selected a dresser, whose better acquaintance we shall make presently. The dresser, Mrs. Peach, was a thin, jealous, acidulous old woman, a Cockney to the marrow, devoted to Alice, and ignorant of everything outside the theatrical profession. Mrs. Peach served on occasion as watch-dog. 'Alice's boys, provided they were on sufficiently intimate terms with the management, were allowed to knock at 'Alice's dressing-room; but Peach sat there, alternately grinning and scowling at them.

Alice mimicked inimitably half a dozen celebrities, danced, and retired. She found our paladin awaiting her.

"I am glad to see you," she said, with entire truth. "Where have you been?"

"Abroad," said Harry. 'Alice had never heard of Esther, but, being a shrewd young person, she was well aware that there must have been somebody of her own sex who had cast a shadow, so to speak, upon this splendid specimen of manhood. This was a favourite phrase of Alice's, culled from the novelettes which she read when there was nothing better to do. The boys who passed through the stage door of the Terpsichore were not splendid specimens of manhood, far from it, and Harry caused a flutter amongst choristers whenever he appeared.

"Can you take me out to supper?"

"Yes," said Harry. He wanted to go to bed, but how could he refuse? Alice prattled on, smiling sweetly, and looking up at the *preux chevalier* from under the longest eyelashes in Clapham.

"Peach will call for me at twelve—at the Savoy?"

Harry would have preferred a less smart restaurant, but he didn't say so. After all, was there anything to be ashamed of? Nothing. He would tell Esther the whole story within forty-eight hours.

They supped together in the grill-room at a small table in the corner. Harry was "in form," but Alice, apparently, was not, for she sighed twice and responded but feebly to the sallies of our paladin.

"Anything wrong?" said he.

"I've missed you most awfully; you might have written."

"If I'd thought you really wanted a letter——"

She put her pretty elbows upon the table, placed her face between her hands, and smiled at him.

"You know you're extraordinarily modest, Harry."

"Am I?"

"I dare say the right sort of man is generally modest. The sort I see aren't. They buck about themselves whenever you give 'em a chance. Fancy your not knowing that I should value a letter from you."

"You dear little thing."

"Do you really like me? Are we friends, pals? Honour!"

"We are pals," said Harry, with finality.

"I've never had a pal," said Alice, thoughtfully.

"I thought you had a baker's dozen at least."

"You mean the boys? Of course, I fluff about with them, but I couldn't make a real pal of a boy. I look upon your friendship as a great honour."

Harry blushed.

"Nonsense!" he muttered.

"That's how I feel about it, anyway. I knew I could trust you the very first minute we met. You wouldn't let a pal down, I'll bet."

"I should hope not."

"I wouldn't flatter you for the world. Some of the girls spread it on with a shovel. It makes me quite sick; I couldn't do it, not if it were never so."

"'Pon my soul, I don't believe you could."

"I know that I can learn a lot from you."

"What a funny little girl you are!"

"I shall be furious if you talk to me like that."

"I beg your pardon."

"I do heaps of things of which you disapprove, but what sort of a chance have I had? I wasn't born with a purple spoon in my mouth. I mean—oh! you know what I mean. I was born in Azalea Gardens, Clapham."

"Pretty name, Azalea Gardens."

"Row of hideous little houses. Nine of us in family. We've all had to work. Now, of course, with my salary, I can help a lot."

"Good as gold you are, 'pon my word."

"We've stuck to each other and worried through, but I'm not your class and don't pretend to be."

"Who cares tuppence about class nowadays?"

"I do for one, and in your heart you do for another. Now, perhaps, you know what I felt when I said it was a great honour to have you for a friend."

Harry felt his sympathy for this sweet-faced, candid creature oozing through every pore in his skin. But he decided that it would be inexpedient to talk to her about Esther. Later, perhaps, but not in the Savoy grill-room. She was certainly very understanding—a favourite adjective of his—and extraordinarily intelligent, and—er—appreciative. And she had a figure like a Tanagra statuette, a Grecian nymph, by Jove! He knew that the men present were casting envious eyes at him. Class or no class, Alice Godolphin would challenge admiration in any company. Pretty as a peach she was—and good!

The lights were lowered.

"I must go," said Alice. "I can't keep that poor old dear waiting."

She could, and very often she did, but Harry didn't know that.

As she stood up Harry condemned the Early Closing Act.

"When shall we meet again, dear?"

"I'm going into the country to-morrow to see my mother."

"I'll bet anything you're an awfully good son."

"I've got the best mother in England."

"And she taught you to be nice and kind and polite to all women?"

"Ye—es," said Harry.

CHAPTER XI

THE LITTLE MUMSIE SITS UP

NEXT day he travelled down to Trigg Court, where Lady Matilda was spending a pleasant week with a hostess who might be platitudinous, but who paid her *chef* two hundred a year. During the sweet fall of the year our Harry's mother went from house to house, taking with her an industrious maid and two black Pomeranians. She refused to visit anybody under Royal rank without her darling Poms. Even Mrs. Rockingham Trigg, who loathed dogs and adored cats, said, with real insight: "Now that her children have flown from the nest she must have something to love." Mr. Trigg—to whom no attention was paid—growled out: "I draw the line at parrots." The remark may seem irrelevant, but a fortnight previously a full-blown marchioness had arrived with a white cockatoo, which bit Mr. Trigg's finger to the bone when, as host, he kindly offered the bird a biscuit. Lady Matilda laughed when she heard of the incident, and whispered to Mr. Trigg: "Try parsley next time."

Our paladin was not certain that he approved of some of his mother's friends. He drew the line closer than Mr. Trigg. But he would have admitted, with a sigh, that widows inadequately provided for can't pick and choose. Trigg was a bounder, and as unconscious of his bounds as a kangaroo. You couldn't es-

cape from his bounding; and no one tried, because his coverts were full of birds and his *chef* an artist of the first force.

Harry wired to Lady Matilda that he was coming.

She put on her prettiest frock to receive him, wondering if a reason other than filial love lay behind this unexpected visit. He submitted to be hugged before rather a mixed company, and told her she was looking "stunning." Like his little Mater, he knew the value of a kind word. Then he drank his tea and made himself agreeable to the youngest Miss Trigg, who unwarrantably assumed that she was a magnet to this distinguished young spark. He was in no hurry to talk with his mother; but whenever he caught her fond eye he smiled graciously, reflecting, without rancour, that she thoroughly deserved the lesson she was about to receive. What she had done could not possibly be described as cricket.

Tea at Trigg Court had become a serious affair ever since the visit of a Serene Highness with a Gargantuan appetite; but it came to an end at last, and the more serious of the guests settled down to bridge, while the young and frivolous retreated to the billiard-room to play "fives" on Mr. Trigg's new table. Harry sauntered across the hall to his mother.

"Dear fellow," she murmured, "I'm longing for a chat with you. Shall we slip off to my sitting-room? These good, kind people always give me a sitting-room. So very dear of them, isn't it?"

They went up the grand staircase arm in arm.

"Now," said Lady Matilda, "we shall be comfy. Would you like to ring for your slippers?"

"Thanks; my boots are quite comfortable."

"This is one of the few advantages you men have."

A wood fire burned in the fireplace. Lady Matilda sank into a chair upon one side of the hearth; our Harry sat down, slightly upright, in the chair opposite. He could see his mother's face perfectly.

"I have found Esther," he said abruptly.

"Where? How very interesting!"

He spoke slowly, emphasising, perhaps unduly, certain words.

"In a Southampton—slum."

"In a—slum?"

"Starving!"

"How perfectly awful!"

"Horrible!"

He paused, having the dramatic sense, so necessary to those who wish to rise in the Diplomatic Service. Lady Matilda moved uneasily in her comfortable chair. She was too fashionable a dame not to have done a little amateur slumming, and she had seen women within a stone's-throw of St. Peter's, Eaton Square, who looked as if they might be starving. For that reason, amongst others, she had abandoned the submerged tenth; for we have her own word for it that her heart was soft.

"What on earth did you do, Harry? I never heard of anything so shocking in my life."

"I fed her and clothed her," said Harry.

His mother's expression changed. Something in his tone challenged her attention, her maternal solicitude.

"And then, dear?"

"And then I took her to France."

"You took her to France!" Lady Matilda moistened a too dry lip, but she breathed more freely. France, in her opinion, was a sort of sanctuary in extraordinary cases like this. In France even the most strait-laced people made proper allowance for the climate and—er—the customs. She had seen a bishop—an English bishop—enjoying a talk with a naughty little actress—in France.

"People mind their business over there," said Harry.

"Is Esther over there—*now?*"

"She is; I left her in the châlet I have taken near Rouen the day before yesterday."

"This is very upsetting. Will you please give me the eau de Cologne? There is a large bottle on the washing-stand."

Harry fetched the eau de Cologne.

As he uncorked the bottle he said quietly: "I'm going to marry her."

Lady Matilda gave a tiny scream.

"Marry her!" she gasped. "Marry her—*now?*"

"Surely, it's the right thing to do. She is the wife you chose for me. Because she has been unfortunate——"

"Unfortunate! What a word to use! You say you've picked her out of a slum, this girl, a—a natural child!"

"Could she help that, poor dear?"

"Harry, you will drive me wild. You can't do this. For my sake, for your own sake, I entreat you to—to——"

She broke off, stammering and confused.

"What do you suggest that I should do?"

"Anything, anything but this. Good Heavens! Out of a slum! My unhappy boy!"

"If you will go back to Pont Street and receive her——"

"But I can't; I won't. How dare you ask such a thing? It would be criminal, positively criminal. I'm sorry, of course, but the girl has touched pitch. What! You stand there and ask me, your mother, to receive the woman with whom you have been—er—er——"

"I am incapable of what you think. Esther has been in my care, as a sister."

"You expect our world to believe that?"

"If you do your part—yes."

"I won't do my part. Harry, you are breaking my heart; but if you marry this woman, neither she nor you will enter my house. There! And after what I have done for you——. Oh! Oh!!"

She burst into tears.

He regarded her coldly, as a judge, not as a son. When the first ebullition had subsided, he said in the same even tone: "If it had not been for you, mother, I should have married Esther four years ago."

"What do you mean?"

"You must have known that Camber, who is a better fellow than I had supposed, increased my allowance so as to make the marriage possible."

She stared at him, bewildered; he saw plainly that this important knowledge had not been vouchsafed to her.

"Camber?" she repeated vacantly.

"My uncle, it seems, thought then and now that I did the right thing in offering Esther marriage."

"I can't believe it."

"I see you can't, and I'm sorry. I suppose he didn't make himself plain at the time. He spoke plainly enough yesterday."

"Yesterday? You have seen him?"

"Yes; Esther and I are to be married from the house in Grosvenor Square; he gives her away, and he settles two thou. a year on us."

If he had wished to see his mother "sit up" he experienced that pleasure. In every sense of the phrase Lady Matilda sat up, and struggled to evoke order out of chaotic thoughts.

"Does he know?"

"Everything. Far more than I have told you. He is a gentleman, and—er—chivalrous. He admits frankly that he never did me justice till yesterday. What you and your world consider shocking he looks upon as obvious and proper."

"I always said he was the oddest creature. Why didn't you tell me this at once?"

"You hoodwinked me out of four years of happiness."

They stared at each other. Then Lady Matilda laughed. People liked her because she could enjoy

a joke against herself. She had great recuperative qualities, and an enormous respect for what Camber represented.

"If the head of the family is satisfied, I shall not make myself conspicuous and ridiculous. First and last I have acted in your interests. It will be very inconvenient, but I suppose Esther ought to come to Pont Street."

"It will mean a great deal to her—and to me."

He bent down and kissed her.

After dinner Lady Matilda breathed a word into Mrs. Rockingham Trigg's left ear.

"My dear, Harry brought the most delightful news. I can't mention names, but I'm the happiest woman in the world to-night. My darling boy has behaved quite too chivalrously, and now he is going to reap his reward. He has been so noble; and Camber, at last, sees him as he is. He never did him justice. I've said so again and again. There will be a quiet wedding in Grosvenor Square. It really is an idyll. *Entre nous*, Camber has been most liberal in the matter of settlements. Don't kiss me; Constance Malplaquet is looking at us. Squeeze my hand, dear."

Mrs. Rockingham Trigg squeezed a plump little hand.

"Not a word to a soul here."

"Of course not. I think I can make a guess. An idyll—eh?"

"Quite a romance, *quite!* It brings back so vividly

my own little affair. I beg your pardon? Perfectly!—the finger of Providence! How true! I knew that I could count on your sympathy."

That night Mrs. Trigg said to her husband when he came up from the smoking-room, "That idiot Harry Rye is going to marry Alice Godolphin."

"Eh—wh—at? Impossible!"

"Just had it from the absent-minded little puss."

Lady Matilda was known as the "absent-minded little puss" because, having failed to obtain an invitation to a very great function at Piccadilly House, she had, notwithstanding, put in an appearance, and in answer to a brutal question of the hostess, who happened to be her own cousin, she replied, "Receive a card, my dearest Bunny? Really, I can't say whether I did or not. You know, darling, what an absent-minded little puss I am, and I felt that at *your* house I should always be welcome."

Mr. Trigg shrugged his shoulders.

"How sick pussy must be! Thank the Lord, we needn't give anything."

"Camber makes a handsome settlement. They are to be married from Grosvenor Square."

"Um! Then we shall have to weigh in heavily."

Next day our Harry returned to London, somewhat inflated. An observant stranger, who sat opposite to him in the railway carriage, and was, therefore, enabled to form a leisurely judgment of his points, came to the conclusion that there was a great deal of the young fellow, and likely to be more as the years passed. Harry did not read, nor did he speak to his

travelling companion. He lay back and meditated, rehearsing, so to speak, the great, the final scene in this romantic drama. He saw his Esther awaiting him, he felt her glad hand in his, he savoured, deliciously, the fruits that hung temptingly within reach, and which another fellow—the world was full of blackguards—might have plucked prematurely.

There were moments when he was amazed at what he had done; the magnitude of his achievement almost oppressed him. In a sense greatness had been thrust upon him. The affair would have assumed different proportions if Camber had not risen also to a tremendous opportunity. Camber was entitled to a lot of credit. Camber had an eye! After this the relations between the head of the family and himself would be of the happiest.

The Mater, too, had received a salutary lesson. Before Harry left Trigg Court she had come entirely round to the right view. Perhaps—it was a nice point—he had been a bit rough with the little Mumsie, but at the end, when she kissed him in the hall, she had whispered, "I am so proud of my boy." And Mrs. Trigg—not a bad sort, Mrs. Trigg, although the smile with which she speeded her departing guests was, perhaps, more genuine than the one with which she welcomed them—had murmured "*Tout vient à point à qui sait attendre.*" She fancied her French, but it was the right language to use to a diplomat, who knew, none better, how to wait.

That night he crossed from Southampton to Havre. The Channel was smooth and the moon at the full.

Our paladin sat on deck, gazing at the silvery waters, supremely happy. Life stretched before him, a pleasant pilgrimage across tranquil seas illumined by a soft, tender light. He eyed with interest an obviously honeymooning couple, who, arm in arm, paced up and down the deck. They were of the baser sort, trippers, but his heart warmed to them. Indeed, he felt kindly disposed to all human creatures, one of the great brotherhood, and not the least of them, inasmuch as he recognised the inordinate claim of weakness upon strength.

The exquisite beauty of the scene did not appeal very profoundly to our Harry. Those who derive deep pleasure in the contemplation of themselves pay but scant attention to other objects. Narcissus, we may conjecture, admired himself more than the stream in which his image was reflected. And to Harry the eternal youth and freshness of the sea served but to illustrate similar attributes within himself, and its conquest by man wielding his tremendous weapons of iron and steam provoked the reflection that Man, generally speaking, *was* victorious over Woman. "*La mer est toujours femme.*" The phrase had stuck in a fairly retentive memory. How true! He mused pleasantly upon the mystery and instability of water and women, upon the strength and steadfastness of men.

Thus he kept vigil, like a true knight, while the moonlit hours glided by.

At eleven upon the following morning he was climbing the sharp hill from the river, looking upward at the châlet which sheltered his love. To his regret the sun was obscured by mists which might have struck chill

to a heart less ardent. And a soft, penetrating rain had begun to fall, which accounted, perhaps, for the fact that Esther was not at the foot of the hill to greet him. He had wired that he was coming from Havre.

At the terrace he paused for an instant, surveying the familiar scene: the tiny lawn, the chestnut tree, the bench beneath it, and the table. On the table lay a straw hat of Esther's, trimmed by herself. Probably she had been sitting there, waiting for him, when it came on to rain. He crossed the lawn and opened the door. As he did so he called loudly:

"Esther! Esther!"

Then he heard a heavy step, not Esther's, and a moment later Babette appeared.

"Where is Mademoiselle?"

"Mademoiselle left the day after Monsieur."

"Left?" He stared at her stupidly, thunderstruck.

"I have this letter for Monsieur."

She held out a note, which he took mechanically, still staring stupidly at Babette's rosy cheeks.

"Did Mademoiselle tell you where she was going?"

"No, Monsieur. We supposed to join Monsieur in England."

He went into the salon to read the note, walking stiffly, as a man walks after a heavy fall out hunting, when he is not quite sure whether or not he has received a serious injury. He knew that Esther had run away; her departure could be called by no other name. Why? Why?

He broke the seal of the envelope.

My Dear Harry,—I am going away because I can't stay here any longer, because I won't add another farthing to the enormous debt I owe you. You have given me back more than health and strength—my faith in myself, which I thought was dead. I still believe that I can earn my own living; and I'm going to try again.

Harry, dear, there is one way in which I could have paid my debt in full to you, but—oh! how can I write it?—I don't love you devotedly enough to do it. Think me hard and ungrateful you must, but believe me honest. Perhaps I am not capable of real love. I don't know. I adored you when we were boy and girl. And there was a moment here, the first moment after my poor wits came back, when I realised what you had done. Then—— But what is the use of saying it? I'm a creature of impulse, and impulse drives me from you to-day, when a week ago it almost drove me to fling myself into your arms.

I have taken a few clothes and enough of the money you left me to pay for my ticket to England and a week's board and lodging. Babette has the rest.

I wish I had the pluck to pay the bill, but I haven't. That is all, and Heaven knows it is enough. I can hear you cursing me, because I saw in your eyes what you wanted.

Please don't try to find me! It will only mean more pain for you and for me.

Good-bye, dear. The time may come when you will think kindly of

Esther.

Harry sat down, staring at the sheet of paper, absolutely confounded. The surprise had paralysed his sensibilities. He was incapable of thought, but, curiously enough, acutely conscious of trifles. The thing most vividly present to his mind at the moment was Esther's hat, lying upon the table outside. An animal fury possessed him to rush out and trample upon it. His gaze wandered round the salon. In that chair she had sat; at the writing-table near the window she

had written the letter he still held in his nerveless hand. He glanced at the clock. It had run down. Then he looked up sharply.

The rain was pattering hard upon the roof of the châlet, and the rising wind seemed to sing a requiem for a summer that could never come back, for the days that were dead.

CHAPTER XII

A TOWER OF STRENGTH

ESTHER arrived in London upon the day that Harry crossed to Havre. She went straight to Miranda's rooms, arriving at the moment when she knew from long experience that her friend would be alone; the sacred interval between the morning and afternoon classes. In the typewriting establishment upon the first floor the machines were ticking furiously. Esther, bag in hand, paused and listened to the familiar sound, which brought back so much to the memory, and in particular the day when Sabrina died. Then she mounted the steep, dusty staircase and knocked at Miranda's door.

"Come in," said a cross voice.

Miranda, having finished her chop and pint of stout, was smoking upon her sofa, and annoyed, therefore, at being disturbed. Esther opened the door, faintly smiling.

"I have come back," she said.

Miranda rolled off the sofa, choking with tobacco smoke wrongly inhaled, and astonishment. She had always believed that Esther would come back, but not the Esther who had gone away: possibly some thin, wretched, broken-hearted creature, the wreck of the joyous, charming girl she had loved.

"Gracious!"

"Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Glad! Lawsy! how glad I am! But you're the same, child: you've not changed."

"Oh, haven't I, Miranda. I've not got the five pounds"—she spoke very solemnly. "I was tempted to steal it, but I couldn't rob Peter to pay Paul."

"You look wonderfully well, my dear."

"I am. That's why I came back. I shall earn that five pounds."

"Hang the five pounds! Have some lunch?"

"Can you put me up for the night?"

"Can I? I wonder! Hold hard!"

Miranda took from behind the sofa a large card, upon which was inscribed the following legend:

"Miss Jagg regrets that business of urgent importance will prevent her keeping her engagements to-day."

She hung this outside her door, and then, entering the room, locked the door and laughed.

"Now we shall be cosy. Sit down beside me, begin at the beginning, and don't leave anything out. You have behaved outrageously, and the only amends you can make is to tell all the truth and nothing but the truth. Kiss me instead of the Book, and remember you're on oath."

"All right," said Esther, with a certain grimness.

Twice during the recital Miss Jagg wiped tears from her cheeks, but Esther remained dry-eyed. At the end there was a pause.

"So you ran away?"

"Nothing else was possible."

"When Mr. Rye came here he struck me as being a very honourable young man, the sort of young fellow who would always do the right thing. It's my belief he meant to marry you."

"Perhaps. It is—just possible, although he never said so. But, Miranda, I couldn't marry him unless I loved him."

"I never heard such rubbish in my life."

"Then why aren't you a matron? Lots of nice men have asked you to marry them. Don't deny it."

"It's true." She sighed, and then winked. "You had me there, you little wretch. Perhaps I was even a bigger fool than you. Perhaps I've wished again and again that I'd been wiser. We are the perversest creatures. But I had my profession to support me. And you——"

"I've enough to keep me for a week."

"I have really no patience with you. He is so handsome. Even in my salad days I couldn't have said 'No' to a man like your Harry."

"He never will be mine. How he will loathe me when he reads my letter."

"You let him down easy, I hope?"

"I tried to be honest."

"He'll hunt you. And he'll draw this little cover first."

"Of course I can trust you to throw him off the scent."

"You mean that I'm a good liar?"

"An accomplished actress, you darling old thing."

"I don't mind lying in a good cause," said Miranda,

reflectively, "but this is a bad one. Most of my sympathy is with him, poor dear! Nice curly hair, too!"

"Is there any chance of your finding me an engagement, on tour, understudy, walk on, anything?"

"Not a dog's chance, not an unborn puppy's chance. My advice is, stop here till he comes."

"I won't. That's flat, the last word."

Miranda examined her attentively.

"It amazes me," she said, reflectively, "that you have remained sweet after contact with horrors."

"I did not look sweet when Harry found me."

"Um! That may have given him pause. Perhaps he waited——?"

"Too long," said Esther sharply, betraying herself.

"Ah—ha! I had a glimpse then. All has not been said. Your oath, your solemn oath, sworn on my cheek. Dare you break it? I bid you speak!"

She declaimed the phrase. The granddaughter of Charles James Bean commanded truth to spring from her well.

"He waited too long," Esther admitted, with flaming cheeks. "He waited too long before. That settled me. I saw him counting the cost, do you understand? He wanted me—yes—more and more as the days passed, but he was afraid of the cost. And he taught me to count the cost, too."

"To yourself or to him?"

"To both of us. That sort of thing is infectious. Even if his intentions were honourable, they were vague. The poor man didn't know, of course, what might have happened when I was submerged."

"Did anything awful happen?"

"Nothing. I sometimes wonder how I escaped the last ignominy. Sabrina used to wonder how she escaped. She took no credit to herself. Nor do I. It's a sort of instinct with some women. They may be tempted cruelly, but they hold on desperately to the one thing. I held on, but——"

"Your oath. No reserves, please!"

"If Harry had been dishonourable I should have been easily beguiled." She blushed.

"What?"

"You have dragged it from me. When I realised what he had done I was afire to pay him back. At a nod I should have been at his feet. I was his for the asking then, but he didn't ask. It is some excuse, perhaps, that I was weak, able to remember nothing but the bottomless pit out of which he had rescued me. Miranda, he became a god—colossal. I don't think he knew what was in my heart at that minute; if he did—well, in that case he protected me against myself."

"Poor child!"

"I think with horror of what might have happened. Now"—she threw up her head—"I am strong again; I can fight the devils within and without."

"Shush-h-h! Some of 'em are coming upstairs now. The duffers' class. Lie low!"

They heard voices and a laugh, then retreating footsteps.

"This means a sovereign at least out of your pocket."

"Seven and six; not a ha'penny more. Price of a seat in the dress-circle. I'm getting my money's worth, and more, too."

"To-morrow morning I'm off to the nursing-home. I have a feeling that the matron, Mrs. Tower—do you remember her?—Yes? A wonderful woman. Well, Sabrina advised me to go to her."

"It's not a bad idea. To-night we'll celebrate. I've seats for a play. Let's try to forget the past."

"And the future," said Esther.

A directory informed Esther that Mrs. Tower had not moved from her snug quarters near Wimpole Street, and on arrival our heroine noticed that another house had been annexed, and duly painted and garnished to match the original nursing-home. As she approached a hansom dashed up, and out of it sprang a doctor, carrying a small black bag. An electric brougham stood near the curb. At an open window a nurse in spotless blue and white smiled serenely. Esther could hardly believe that more than two years had passed. But she shuddered and paled when her glance fell upon the window of the room wherein Sabrina had died. And immediately she felt weak and wretched, whereas a minute previously she had exulted in her strength. Her temperament always played these sorry pranks. The mercury rose like a rocket, and sank as swiftly. She had a mind to return to Miranda.

"What a miserable coward I am!"

With this conviction, freezing hands and feet, she pressed the bell, wondering whether she looked half as discomposed as she felt. A man in modest livery—another concrete example of prosperity—told her that Mrs. Tower would see her presently.

Half an hour passed.

Esther had not asked for an appointment, and Mrs. Tower, of course, was as busy as any woman in the kingdom. Esther sat in the same room, in the same chair, in which she had awaited Harvey Napier, whose fine head still stood out, cameo-like, against the shadows of that never-to-be-forgotten morning. What had two years brought to him?

Her feet grew colder as apprehension flamed in her brain. Why should this stranger help her? She must be besieged by girls carefully trained as nurses, eager to serve under so capable a commander—girls, moreover, keen to minister to others, proud of their chosen profession, glorying in it. The matron had an eye for such, an eye even sharper to detect incompetence and inexperience. After two minutes' talk Mrs. Tower would bid her good-bye.

The omnipotent lady entered.

She seemed, if anything, slightly more massive, more monumental. Esther quailed at sight of her.

"Can I do anything for you, Miss Yorke?"

"I want a job. I know nothing of nursing. I must begin at the very bottom. My friend, Miss Lovell, spoke to me of you; but you've forgotten?"

"No, I have not forgotten."

"You must be pestered with these applications. I

feel that there is just one chance in a thousand of your taking me, and that chance brought me here."

Mrs. Tower inclined her head. Esther's voice, singularly soft, attracted her; Esther's hands, finely formed, the hands that can never be clumsy, challenged steady attention. She was still examining the hands when she answered gravely:

"I don't believe in chance."

"You see design behind everything?"

"I try to see it. Miss Lovell was your friend?"

"The best friend a girl ever had."

"A judge of character, I take it."

"Wonderful."

"You were partners?"

"We kept a hat-shop. Bad debts ruined me. I was foolish and reckless; I trusted the wrong people; I was sold up."

"And then?"

"I began to slide downhill. I went on tour with a third-rate company. I found myself stranded in Bristol. I got work in a shop. Then I fell ill. I had very bad times, too bad to talk about. But now I'm strong again, and I've enough money to keep me for one week, that's all."

"I'll give you a chance," said Mrs. Tower. "You'll dislike the work, but you'll do it."

"I shall do it gratefully," said Esther, "whatever it is."

"Even if I ask you to do what the others won't do?"

"Even then."

Mrs. Tower held out her hand. Then she said, austerely: "Life and death hang upon hairs in this house, and I exact from everybody in my employment what I give myself: obedience, punctuality, cleanliness, and serenity. If a nurse on duty has a raging toothache, her patient must not know it; if she feels miserable, she must smile. It's convent discipline."

"When can I come here?"

"To-morrow."

She walked back through the dingy streets of doctordom almost gaily, self-justified, knowing in her heart that she had done well, but knowing also that she could have loved tenderly and faithfully a Harry upon her own level, not a paladin upon a pedestal. Now she swung along, free as the ambient air, bound only to work.

Miranda asked questions: her wage, the nature of her work.

"I shall take what she offers: I shall do what she commands."

"Lawsy! How the spirit has been kicked out of you!"

"Harry is reading my letter, perhaps at this moment."

"He'll be here soon, that's a comfort."

"You promised not to betray me."

"Pooh! He'll run you to ground. I *am* sorry for that young man. Precious few of his sort about, I can tell you."

"That's it. He's miles and miles above me."

"Let 'Excelsior' be your motto. In the end you

will take him. Why not at the beginning—in the middle, I mean?"

"Does he loathe me? Is he cursing me?"

"I hope so. Then there will be a healthy reaction. I shall expect him to-morrow."

"It's a comfort to remember that there are six millions in London."

"And out of all of 'em you're the one 'she' to him. Importunity will be your master."

"No better reason could be given for lying snug."

"Snug! Roustabout and bottle-washer in a nursing-home. Pah!"

"I dare say I shall have my Sunday out to spend with you."

"I don't know about that. You exasperate me; I want to shake and slap you, you sentimental simpleton!"

"Sentimental? That is the one thing I am not."

Miranda laughed.

"You are, you were, and you always will be a woman of sentiment."

Later they had tea together and muffins such as you get in London. The warmth, the atmosphere, the familiar furnishings, and Miranda's round, quizzical face moved Esther strangely. She wanted to laugh, and she wanted to cry; but she only laughed. Miranda prattled about her own affairs: the failures and successes of the theatrical season. My sister, Laura, apparently, had reaped a golden harvest, but not a penny of it had come Miranda's way.

"She was wonderful, my sister Laura, simply wonderful."

"How can you mention her name after the way she has treated you?"

"Tut—likewise, pish! She is a very great artist and a very mean little woman. I am proud of her as artist. When I think of the delight she has given to hundreds of thousands——!"

"She would let you starve."

"I believe she would, poor dear."

"Your family seems to have treated you abominably."

"I have nothing to complain of."

At such moments this fat, rather ugly old woman provoked astonishment and admiration. Her enthusiasm upon the sacred subject of her family never failed to arouse in Esther a curious envy and shame. It was whispered that the illustrious Charles James had ill-treated his wife, who adored him to the end. Esther was quite convinced in her own mind that Miranda would black my sister Laura's boots if she were asked to do so. As for Charles Jagg, who, domestically speaking, was impossible, but had the finest delivery of any actor on the English stage, it was well known that he had bled Miranda almost to death a score of times.

Was it possible to adore the artist and despise the man?

Harry, playing the hero intermittently, jigged before her eyes, so high up that it caused a crick in the neck to look at him. What he had done, in one sense, was a finer performance than anything of my sister

Laura's. It was fine even if you dared to think that it was acting. Why was she not thrilled? She wanted to be thrilled. Her imagination, trailing miserably upon the ground, yearned to soar. This became a source of irritation, a mental eczema most tormenting at night. Other women, some of the very best, took men as they found them, totted up their good and bad qualities, struck a balance, and thanked Heaven if it was not on the wrong side. If she could have done that with Harry all would have been well.

But she couldn't.

Her daily task was apportioned next day. She was placed under the charge of the head nurse in the operating-room, to learn the alphabet of the business, the art of cleanliness.

"Shall I be present at the operations?"

"Not yet. Probably never."

Esther smiled, indicating relief. The chief of her department, a tall, hard-faced woman, eyed her with a derisive contempt not easy to bear.

"Do I look hopeless?"

"You look too fine for the work."

"I am not."

"I hope so. Scrubbing much in your line?"

"I learned to scrub myself when I was three."

"That's something. All the same, I asked Mrs. Tower for a strong, healthy girl, not a young lady. You'll have to go through the mill."

"Naturally."

"It won't come natural to you. Far from it. Maybe

she wants to see what stuff you're made of. That's like her. She gets every ounce out of me."

"Does she spare herself?"

"No, she doesn't. But she's cast iron. Now for your first lesson in scrubbing floors and walls and ceilings."

At half-past four tea was served in a room set apart for the nurses. Esther, without her uniform, attracted many glances. Most of those present were quite young women. They laughed and chatted upon the subjects and objects beloved of schoolgirls, were all playgoers and readers of novels, and interested in clothes.

"I mean to have that boa," said one.

"The bore who took you to Earl's Court?"

"It's mink, but you'd swear it was sable. I shall buy it to-morrow."

"You don't get off to-morrow."

"He won't live out the night."

Esther hoped that she didn't shiver too conspicuously. The speaker was alluding to her patient. And yet she had not spoken heartlessly or with indifference. She simply stated a fact. Her patient happened to be a distinguished man, a cavalry officer, who had held a high command. "Lights out!" had sounded for him, and he was sinking quietly.

"I'd an awful time last night," said another nurse with the freshest of cheeks. "Couldn't please, no matter how hard I tried. Dead beat I was this morning. Toast! Thank you!"

"I can stand their peevishness and ingratitude,"

said a third, "but when the doctor slates you because his patient won't behave himself I call it thick."

"Mr. Napier never does that."

"Mr. Napier comes here still, does he?" demanded Esther of the nurse next to her.

"Yes; do you know him?"

"I have met him—twice."

"He's a good sort, but cold, a regular icicle as far as women are concerned."

"Is he married?"

"Not he. Knows too much about us, perhaps. He's started a sort of nursing-home at his house in Harley Street, where he has a wonderful laboratory. Marvellous operator he is! I'd like to see him at work."

"Would you?"

"You're too squeamish, eh? You'll get over that. I fainted twice when I began. That was four years ago, at Bart.'s. I had my head chaffed off."

"Do you all begin at the regular hospitals?"

"Most of us. I heard that you were given a job just for the asking. Bit of a pull somewhere, eh?"

"No."

"It's odd. Perhaps you're one of the lucky ones."

"I should not describe myself as that exactly."

"Well, if you can hold up your job you'll be all right. We have to work here, but it's the best training-school in England."

Esther went to bed dog-tired but not unhappy.

CHAPTER XIII

THE QUEST BEGINS AGAIN

In certain parts of China, when things go inexplicably wrong, the villagers take out their Joss and trounce him. He is given to understand that he has not behaved himself, and must mend his ways. Perhaps there are times in all our lives when the little god of Self is similarly treated. We take him out, see him as he is, an unbeautiful Joss, and thwack him.

After reading Esther's letter our paladin suffered acutely, but for the moment, indeed for several hours, he blamed not the Joss within but the fickle Jill without. With her he was quite furious, because she had knocked him off his perch. He might have called for bell and candle and Book and cursed her grievously, had he not been educated at Eton.

He woke, next day, in less tempestuous mood, to find the sun shining and the wind transformed into a gentle breeze. Accordingly he ordered coffee to be brought to him under the chestnut treee, and there he saw Esther's hat—a lamentable object, sodden, discoloured, limp, and shapeless. He remembered that he had thought of trampling it underfoot, and lo! the elements had destroyed it. Our unconscious humourist, gazing at the dilapidated object, decided that the elements had taken an unwarrantable liberty. He laid down the hat with a sigh, and thought sentimentally

of burying it, cremation occurring to him as the more obvious and satisfactory rite.

After breakfast he smoked a pipe. Then Babette appeared to ask the question not asked before. "Would Monsieur want her services during the winter?" Monsieur replied in the negative, and then and there gave notice to both the girls. Monsieur was leaving the châlet as soon as possible, not to return.

He smoked another pipe, thinking hard. Babette had upset him. She recalled to his mind the talk with Esther. Was it possible that Esther had inferred an intention on his part of leaving her to spend the winter alone? That, of course, would be so like a woman. Because he had not been in the mood to prattle about domestic details, she had leapt to an incredible conclusion. Heavens! It was likely that she had misapprehended his motives. Want of trust! There you are! Yes—there you are, up to your neck in the *fons et origo mali.* Our paladin remembered a few Latin tags. One had to use 'em sparingly nowadays, but sometimes they came in handy. Want of trust! She thought, poor little dear, that she did not love him. Of course she loved him; he had read love in her hazel eyes; but she didn't trust him.

Magnanimously he blamed himself. Yes; he had been selfish. He took out his Joss and spanked it—not too cruelly hard, but as a wise mother spanks a beloved child whose thoughtlessness may have caused serious disaster. He, with his wider experience, ought to have foreseen fog ahead. But, candidly, you never knew where you were with women.

He smoked a third pipe. He was beginning to feel fairly comfortable. The sun floated upward, warming delightfully the air, chilled by the night's rain; down in the willows near the river the chaffinches and tits and wrens were discussing their approaching journey south. They knew that winter was coming, but not to the place where they were going. What lessons an intelligent mind can learn from birds and beasts! The word "winter" had terrified his own little brown bird. Well, well, she and he would migrate together.

He smoked a fourth pipe, which, admittedly, was one too many and a deliberate slap in the face to Babette, preparing a special "plat" *pour ce pauvre garçon abandonné!* By this time he had almost convinced himself that things had turned out for the best —a favourite phrase of his ever since the notable increase in his allowance. Esther's bolting heightened the dramatic effect of a final scene. He would not be hard on her. When all had been explained she would see him as Camber saw him, as the little Mater saw him, as, as, in short, he was!

He knew that she had fled to Miranda. How? You think that a stupid fellow would not have divined that. No man (or woman) is really stupid about things which very intimately concern themselves. Harry was aware that Esther had left a box full of clothes with Miranda, which she had not claimed, lacking a miserable five pounds. He was aware also that she had fled taking with her a handbag, and barely enough money to pay her travelling expenses. And in her letter she had avowed her intention and ability to

earn a living. Without proper clothes where would she be?

Two days later he was ascending Miranda's flight of stairs. The star class was rehearsing. This fact rather forced Miranda's hand. To be quite frank, Miss Jagg had determined to play a very difficult part, the sort of part she liked, that of goddess out of the machine. Esther was a darling little fool, and her Harry a distinguished and charming young fellow, who had behaved like a perfect gentleman. Miranda told herself that he would be Viscount Camber some day. The twins presented a sufficiently substantial obstacle, but Miranda could jump over stone walls as well as see through them. Esther as Viscountess Camber positively glittered.

"I beg your pardon," said Harry, glancing at the class. "I won't interrupt you now, but when can I see you alone?"

"At two, to-day."

"At two; thank you. Have you seen somebody lately?"

To answer in the affirmative would have "given away" her dear friend. Miranda smiled, and her pleasant voice rose in a carefully sustained note of interrogation. "What on earth makes you think that I should have seen somebody? Have you seen her?"

"I'll tell you everything at two."

As the door closed three voices exclaimed with feminine shrillness: "Who's that?"

"That, my poppets," said Miranda smiling, "is a

charming young fellow, who may be a peer of the realm and a millionaire."

"You named the hour, old dear; has he named the day?"

"Pish!" said Miranda loftily; "I'll tell you this: He is interested, very deeply interested, in a charming girl, so you little fools needn't go home to dream about him."

"I know the name of somebody," said one young lady, "who was trying to escape from musical comedy into legitimate drama."

"Tell us, Topsy, tell us!"

Miranda had a moment's uneasiness. Miss Topsy Touraine answered curtly:

"Alice Godolphin."

"No."

"Fact! Saw 'em at supper together at the Savoy not a week ago. Seen 'em there over and over again. He's Lord Camber's nephew—isn't he, Miranda?—and Alice thinks he's the greatest thing on earth."

"To work!" said Miranda crossly.

The star class failed to please Miss Jagg that morning. She behaved, so Topsy said, like a raging beast, and certainly she used teeth and claws upon Topsy, who was told flatly that the legitimate drama had no place for the likes of her, and that she wasn't fit to walk on in a curtain-raiser. Topsy had talent, but sometimes she over-wagged her tongue. Miranda was furious, because poor Topsy had seen the paladin supping with a good girl.

At two, punctually, she received Mr. Rye with cour-

tesy. Harry spoke first, after greetings had been interchanged.

"I gathered from what you said this morning that Esther had not been here?"

Miranda preserved silence inviolate.

"I found her, Miss Jagg."

"You found her?"

Consummate art was revealed in speaking these three monosyllables. The mere intonation suggested surprise, admiration, and delight. Only one man on earth *could* have found Esther Yorke. What he had done, his success, in contrast to the failure of others, indicated heroic qualities. The classical scholar would have had a vision of Theseus. Harry realised once more that he stood upon the apex of the pyramid. Certainly Miranda Jagg was an understanding person.

"Yes; I found her."

He told his story for the third time; it would be ridiculous to suppose that it lost in the telling. And your true epic must not halt. It should flow smooth as Pope's "Iliad," smooth and strong and deep, like the Niagara River above the falls.

Miranda, with a cigarette between her lips, listened attentively.

"It's my opinion," declared Harry in conclusion, "that she bolted because she thought—er—that I was not going to do the square thing. You take me?"

"Perfectly."

"Can I say to you, Miss Jagg, that I am incapable of—er—doing the—er—other thing?"

"You are a very noble gentleman, Mr. Rye."

"Really, Miss Jagg!"

"I never met any man like you."

"Please!"

"Of course you are—dangerous."

"I say, Miss Jagg——!"

"I repeat, dangerous, to any girl's peace of mind."

"I have always stuck to Esther, you know."

Now this is exactly what Miranda wanted to know. Her experience with my brother Charles had been unhappy. If you can't believe your own brother, whose word will you take? Charles was a gilt-edged liar about women and horses. Miranda's voice was very silky when she murmured:

"There must have been—others?"

"No."

"Little teeny-weeny flirtations with married women?"

"No."

"With fascinating members of my profession?"

"Never."

Had he forgotten Alice? It is improbable. Was he, then, a liar? Emphatically—no. But he stood poised at a giddy height, and he dared not risk a tumble. Your sprawling fellow looks such an ass. Miranda shook her finger.

"Not even one? Come, come!"

"Always Esther."

"You ought to have been christened Joseph." Another name had occurred to her—Ananias—but she kept that to herself.

"You like your joke, Miss Jagg?"

"I do, I do."

"You told me that Esther left a box with you."

"It is here still."

"She must come for it."

"It has been here two years."

"Where can she be?"

"Probably in London."

"I shall employ the detective who found her before."

"You might do worse."

With that he rose to take leave. Upon the threshold of the room he turned, glancing at the shabby furniture and the shabby old woman in her shabby arm-chair.

"Miss Jagg, I wish you would let me pay you that five pounds. It would be doing me a kindness."

"Oh!"

The woman, not the actress, unveiled herself. She stood up, indecision quivering upon her lips. A really kind word had flown straight to her heart.

"I couldn't allow that, Mr. Rye. But it's nice of you to have thought of it, and—and——"

"Yes?"

"I hope you will find Esther. I shall try in my feeble way to help you. If I hear anything——"

"You will let me know. Good-bye."

When he was out of the house Miranda scribbled a note to Esther:

H. has been here. He got nothing out of me. But I want to see you as soon as possible. Beg, borrow, or steal one hour.

Yours ever,

MIRANDA.

Esther dropped in for half an hour next day. She was wearing her uniform, and looked charming, but she was not nearly so pretty—so Miranda decided—as Alice Godolphin.

"My dear, he wants to do the square thing. He told me so in just those words. He says he is *incapable* of anything else."

"Do you doubt that?"

"My dear, men will be men. They're just like us. It's all a question of temptation. Your Harry is wonderful, but let's admit that he's human, and have done with it. The point to keep in mind is that he wants to marry you."

"It's too late. Oh, Miranda, can't you understand? I don't love him. To marry him now would be shameless, much, much worse than if I had really loved him, and stayed on at Mont Plaisir without marriage."

"Lord! What a little fool you are!"

"Perhaps. Anyway, I'm going to put in three years with Mrs. Tower. At the end of the first year I shall earn good wages; at the end of the third year I shall have my certificate and be independent."

"And you will be twenty-seven."

"You must understand that I'm tied up tight. As a rule, the probationers get nothing for the first year. Mrs. Tower has made me an exception. She's an extraordinary woman, Miranda. She's nice to me, because she liked Sabrina. Did you ever hear of such a funny reason?"

"Often. Mrs. Tower wouldn't stand in the way of your marrying Mr. Rye."

"Of course not."

"It's not fair to let Mr. Rye scurry about London, spending time and money looking for you."

"If you would tell him the brutal truth——?"

"Certainly not. How can you chuck substance for shadow?"

"He is substantial," Esther admitted; "and I dare say I'm a fool. But I don't love him, and I don't believe that I have ever loved him. I'm not sure that I know him—the real Harry, I mean. He's a sort of whirling blur. He reminds me a little of Henry Fitz-Roy on the stage. It's dreadful to say such a thing after what he's done, but I am almost convinced that he poses!"

"What an idea!" Miranda spoke scornfully, but she felt uneasy. She had asked herself a thousand times: "Is this young man a poser?" And the question had not been answered definitely.

"Ideas are to us what facts are to men," retorted Esther. "I suppose I mustn't let Harry spend any more money, but I don't think he will. To use an expression of his, let's mark time for a day or two."

CHAPTER XIV

WHICH ESTABLISHES THE AXIOM, "IT PAYS TO BE GOOD"

HARRY had an interview with the detective who had found Esther in Southampton. Then he drove to Pont Street, where Lady Matilda was waiting to receive Esther with open arms. The absent-minded little puss, after much thought and even prayer, had determined to lay aside those vaulting ambitions which small mothers hopefully entertain for large sons. As a woman of the world she was prepared to make the best of a sorry business. Already she had, so to speak, soaped the ways over which Esther, secretly regarded as a derelict, might slide safely into the troublous waters of society. She had a word with Lord Camber; and another with Dorothea, who happened to be passing through town. Lady Matilda admitted frankly that her daughter puzzled and sometimes distressed her. Since her brilliant marriage you never knew, my dear, quite how to take her. George was too proud a man to complain, but if he was still satisfied with his wife he must be a person easily pleased. Dorothea, secure in the possession of an enormous income, permitted herself the luxury of saying disagreeable things. Having listened to the amazing story, without comment or interruption, she remarked drily: "Esther will give more than she receives"—an astounding statement, and said with an air of finality

which made further conversation impossible. Dorothea brought the interview to an end by adding: "I shall welcome her as a sister and come to the wedding."

To his mother poor Harry showed Esther's letter.

"I am sure," he affirmed solemnly, "that she bolted because she didn't trust me."

Then he related the Babette incident.

Now, Lady Matilda's cleverness, such as it was, must be regarded as a hard polish imparted by the constant attrition of the atoms that compose modern society. A woman of real perception would have read much between the lines of Esther's letter. Lady Matilda, quite honestly, read one thing only. She glanced from the letter to her son, and then said: "My poor boy, how simple you are!"

Harry opened his mouth and closed it. He was prepared for anything except this. Simple he was, but never, never would he know it! He had reason to believe himself to be a complicated and expensive piece of machinery, the best output of the Public Schools, the Universities, and the Services. He had cost a great many thousand pounds to perfect, and never doubted, or could doubt, that the money had been wisely invested. Simple? Oh, Lord!

"When I call you simple, dear, I mean that your nobility of character, your—er—romantic temperament, and—er—generous disposition blind you completely in this unhappy affair."

Harry smiled faintly. If simplicity walked arm in arm with these qualities, it was certainly an attribute not to be despised. Lady Matilda continued:

"Has it occurred to you, Harry, that Esther may have run away because she knew herself unworthy to become your wife?"

"What do you say?"

"Let us be perfectly calm! Did Esther give you her full confidence?"

"I never asked for it."

"Naturally. You are a gentleman. But she owed you that at least. Do you know exactly how those last two years were spent?"

"I don't. Perhaps I wanted to know. Then I felt I'd rather not know. I trusted her."

"You trusted her. Well, I don't say that your trust was wasted. Your wonderful trust may have inspired this letter and the running away. I believe it did. At the risk of hurting you, Harry, I must say plainly that a really delicate-minded girl, a perfectly pure girl——"

"Mother! Be careful!"

"It's my duty to speak. The kind of girl I should welcome as a daughter would not have compromised herself by staying on at the châlet after she recovered her senses."

"What on earth could she have done?"

"Speaking personally, I—I do not hesitate to declare that I would sooner have thrown myself into the river."

He gasped. Despite his advantages this point of view had not occurred to him.

"You upset me very much," he murmured.

"You are a clever man, Harry, and I am a silly,

loving little mother, but I have this enormous advantage over you: I am a woman; and I know how women—nice women—feel. I don't throw stones at poor Esther. Who am I to judge others? With her temptations even I——" She sighed; her pretty eyes became wet; she slipped her soft hand into Harry's. He kissed it.

"Dear little Mumsie!"

"My darling, you have had a providential escape. Find Esther, provide for her, but don't marry her! What am I saying? She says she doesn't love you. Deliberately she says she doesn't love you. You are a Rye. You have proper pride. Conceding, which I don't admit, that she is all she should be, are you the man to persecute and bully a girl into marriage? Hardly!"

"I'm not that sort of cad," said our paladin between his teeth.

"If I were you," said Lady Matilda, "I should go abroad again. Leave me to tell a few harmless little fibs. It's quite intolerable that you should make humiliating explanations to your uncle and Dorothea."

"Does Doll know?"

"I saw her yesterday, for a few minutes, on her way north. She was not at all nice to me."

"She used to be Esther's friend. What did Doll say?"

"I can give you her exact words, but her manner was odious—so very superior. 'I shall welcome Esther as a sister and come to the wedding.'"

"That sounds all right."

"My dear Harry, every word she uttered, every glance confirms my opinion that she is quite heartless. I don't think she cares much for me, or for you. She spoke disparagingly of you. No—I refuse to say another word. Dorothea will play her part. Marry any girl you like, and Mrs. Treherne will welcome her as a sister and come to the wedding in a frock that will turn every other woman pea-green with jealousy."

"I say, Mater, you are not quite fair to Doll."

"Perhaps not; she disparaged you."

"What a detestable world this is!"

"One has to go canny. Now, look here, Harry. I wouldn't interfere in this affair for all the world. I have the fullest confidence that you will do, as you always have done, the right thing. But I entreat you not to be rash."

The word was indiscreetly chosen. Harry frowned. Had he been rash upon that morning long ago when Esther slipped her hand into his, and edged close to him on the primrose-brocaded sofa, what misery might have been avoided! Had he been rash when she opened her eyes and recognised him as her saviour, what raptures might have been his!

"I am not likely to be rash," he said stiffly.

"Often I see your poor father in you. Take twenty-four hours at any rate."

"That's sound," said Harry.

"And let me know what you decide as soon as possible."

"You have upset me most awfully."

"I've a racking headache myself."

"I can't think why I should have been picked out to endure these miseries and humiliations."

Lady Matilda was a staunch upholder of the Church of England, and, unless the weather was atrociously bad, never missed divine service. As she put it to Mrs. Rockingham Trigg upon a Sunday morning when Constance Malplaquet proposed bridge, "You must consider the servants and the children, mustn't you?" Also she had a serviceable collection of texts, which came in handy when you found yourself next a bishop's wife, who might say the most appalling things about you if she had reason to suspect that you were a backslider or Laodicean. With one of these texts she comforted her unhappy boy.

"My dear," she said, kissing his forehead, "'whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth.'"

The chastened paladin dined that night at his club, one of those very select and now moribund institutions where it is against the rules to entertain a stranger. Harry told himself that he could not stand a restaurant, and, unfortunately, his mother, with whom he would have enjoyed a quiet evening, was dining out and playing bridge afterwards. The club, of course, was empty, much to our Harry's satisfaction. He wanted to think things over. Nevertheless he ordered a dinner which indicated sound judgment, and a bottle of Latour '75, a really great wine, guaranteed to chase blue devils out of the most impassioned pessimist that ever dined alone. As he sipped the first glass he told himself that life could never be the same again. Sip-

ping the third—they have very large claret glasses at this particular club—he was prepared to swear that the little Mater had hit the nail on the head. Take a woman to catch a woman! Esther had bolted because—well, for the reason, by Jove! which would never have entered *his* head. Poor little Esther! Poor, dear little girl! More sinned against than sinning! A fine phrase that, slightly hackneyed but so expressive! By the time he had tipped up the decanter his thoughts were straying in the direction of the Terpsichore Theatre. Alice had been rather nice the other night. He had felt sorry for her. It was almost a duty to cheer her up. And she was so awfully—appreciative. And as good as gold! It exasperated him to think that she was playing at a music-hall. What choice had she in the matter, with a family of brothers and sisters to support?

He paid his bill, greatly cheered by the reflection that such a bottle of claret would have cost three times as much at a restaurant.

A hansom took him to the stage door.

Here a shock awaited him in the person of "Pony" Harbottle, a subaltern in the Household Cavalry and one of Alice's boys—a smooth-faced, impudent young blackguard, who made love brazenly to every pretty woman he met, married or single. Alice, of course, could know nothing about him; otherwise she would not risk being seen in such company.

"Hullo, Harry!" said the young gentleman. "Come to play gooseberry, have you?"

"How do you do, Harbottle?"

Peach smiled upon Harry and scowled at the audacious youth, whom she stigmatised, even to his face, as a "rotter." Alice received Harry very prettily, considering that she was furious at being caught by him alone with young Harbottle.

"If you'll talk to old Peach, Harry, I'll continue my little conversation with Alice. Peach wants buckin' up a bit."

Harry ignored the rascal and spoke to Alice.

"I crossed last night."

This was satisfactory. A woman is always flattered when a man spends his first evening in England in her company.

"When are you off to Patagonia? It is Patagonia, isn't it?" "Pony" interrupted.

"No, it isn't," said Harry shortly.

"Got a decent cigarette about you? Peach has smoked all mine, bless her!"

"I hav'n't," said Peach. "I don't hold with smoking, or drinking, or telling lies."

"Harry, my boy, you'll have to be careful with Peach. Thanks."

He took three cigarettes from Harry's case and laughed genially. Harry was disgusted and showed it, to the delight of the soldier. Alice smiled upon both. Her smile had made her famous. She always smiled when her photograph was taken, and people living in the country who bought her picture-postcards inferred that her life as a dancer must be a happy one. At this particular moment her smile was informed with a certain subtlety, for she had conceived the idea

of playing off the boy against the man. "Pony," as his nickname implied, was not an animal to be taken seriously, but even "Pony" might make the running for a bigger and finer horse.

"Will you do me a favour?" she said markedly to our paladin.

"If I can."

"Have you an engagement to-night?"

"No."

"I supped with you last time. Will you sup with me this evening?"

Harry's face relaxed. Young Harbottle was being well snubbed, and Alice was doing it charmingly, with naïveté and sweetness.

"I shall be delighted," said he.

"Will *you* join us?" continued Alice, turning to "Pony."

"Will I? Just you and me and Harry?" Alice nodded. "How cosy! Harry, you're in luck. I've some brand new jokes. You'll be able to repeat 'em in Patagonia as your own."

Poor Harry had two hours of this twaddle. To make the matter more poignant Alice laughed joyously at the brand new jokes, and, seemingly, took an interest in young Harbottle unwarranted either by his manners or conversation. When the rascal had the grace to take himself off, being in no way anxious to pay for a cab to Clapham and back, she sighed, and murmured to Harry:

"I knew you wouldn't mind my asking 'Pony'; he's such a nice, unaffected boy, and devoted to me."

"Damn him!" said Harry.

"Oh, Harry!"

"He's not nice at all; and the sooner you know it the better. Even Peach sees that he's the wrong sort. I tell you it's compromising for you to play about with him."

"I have no one to tell me these things," faltered Alice.

"You have me. I'd like to take you out of this infernal music-hall. Good Lord! when I think of you——"

She put a nicely manicured forefinger upon his lip.

"You don't think of me. Why should you?"

"I do think of you."

"That's all tommy-rot!"

He winced, and she saw it, making a mental note: "Tone down slang!" Harry spoke heavily. Latour '75 is a big wine, and at supper champagne had been drunk by the men.

"I think of you more than is good for my peace of mind. I want to be your friend—I swear I do."

"They're turning out the last lights," said Alice. Then she added tremulously: "I thought you wouldn't mind seeing me home. Peach had to go" (Peach, indeed, had been dismissed) "and mother hates my coming back alone."

"I shall be delighted."

"I believe you are a friend, Harry, a real friend. 'Pony' skedaddled because he thought he might find himself in the cart—in the hansom, I mean."

"Just like him," said Harry loftily.

He helped her tenderly into a hansom. It was nearly half-past twelve, but the night was delightfully clear, with a touch of frost in the air, just enough to make it crisp and exhilarating. After the grill-room, with its heavy odours of flowers and scent and rich food, the change was enchanting. They had an excellent horse in front of them, a capable driver behind, and the streets were clear of the heavier traffic. So they sped gaily on their way, between the shadowy rows of houses, with the lamps twinkling into endless perspectives.

For a minute at least not a word was said. Each inhaled the fresh air greedily. Then Alice lay back with a little contented sigh.

"It's heavenly, isn't it?"

"The best part of the evening," Harry whispered.

"You don't think I'm selfish, dragging you all this long way?"

"The longer the better. This fellow is driving much too fast. He doesn't realise what a precious freight he's got."

"Bless you! he knows *me* quite well."

Harry winced for the second time. Publicity was really a terrible affair to a well-ordered mind. Yes, this cabby knew, and every street arab knew—Alice Godolphin. Horrible! Enough to freeze the hot blood of any true paladin.

"Are you very keen about the stage?" he asked.

"Me? I hate it!"

This, alas! was a fib. Alice loved the stage, and

always had loved it ever since she took part in Christmas pantomimes as a fairy at a pound a week: good wages, too. She adored excitement. She even liked being haled before the magistrates, who put searching questions about her education, which, indeed, had been rather neglected. Such excitements came to an end, and dull times followed during the three gawky years between fourteen and seventeen, when she dreamed nearly every night of triumphs to come and daily practised the steps which lead to the temple of fame. As a child and young girl every pleasure she experienced was connected with the stage. To save her life she could not have pointed out Charles's Wain or Orion, but she knew by name and sight every star in the theatrical firmament.

"You hate it! Why?"

Her answer surprised him. She burst into tears. Tears and laughter came swiftly to her. Nor was she acting. For the moment—such is the power of a big personality—she saw herself with Harry's eyes; she had a glimpse of the wonderful real world encompassing the pinchbeck imitation bounded by scenery and footlights, the world in which the very perfect knight at her side filled an honoured place. And these tears resolved any doubts she might have entertained as to whether she truly loved Harry Rye. She did love him, thrilling at his touch, and she believed that she would be perfectly happy with him, even in Patagonia.

"My poor little girl!"

His kind, pleasant voice, his firm hand upon hers, turned a shower into a downpour. Alice laid her pretty

head upon our paladin's shoulder and sobbed tropically.

May those who censure him for kissing her be never placed in such temptation! And we may quote Alice herself, describing the incident to her mother, when we add that the "canoodling" (Alice's word, not ours) was specifically paternal.

Right or wrong, the treatment acted like a charm, and a very pretty scene followed.

"I couldn't help it," she whispered. "Don't scold me!"

"Tell me your trouble, Alice."

"We are such miles and miles apart." Her head was still upon his shoulder, but we divine what she meant. "And I know *you* hate the stage and everybody on it. In your heart you despise me."

"I don't."

"You do. You can't help it. There are hateful women at the Terpsichore; and I have to be civil to 'em. And some of the men are worse; and I have to be civil to them, too. I'd jolly soon get the sack if I told 'em what I really think. I took it as it came, rough and smooth, till you appeared. Now——"

"For heaven's sake, Alice, don't begin again, dear! I can't stand it, 'pon my soul. You make me feel rather cheap. Despise you? Don't I know how many are dependent on you? All the same, if I could help you to get a job at a respectable theatre——"

"Ah! you are a real friend. I told mother about you, and she said to me afterwards: 'Allie, that's one of God's good men.'"

"I should like to meet your mother."

"You must. Poor mother!"

Secretly she was of the opinion that the meeting should be deferred as long as possible. Some of God's good men are a thought hypercritical. Harry said tenderly: "We are real friends now."

"Oh, the blessed comfort of it!"

He patted her hand when she snuggled up to him, sensible that he was in a pleasant but slightly awkward situation—one which challenged the training of a diplomat who happened to be also a man of heart. To have repulsed this quivering little creature would have been simply brutal. Now matters were on the happiest footing.

"Alice, dear——"

"Yes, Harry?"

"We must put our heads together."

"They are together," said Alice, beginning to smile again.

"Why shouldn't you play with actors like Henry FitzRoy, eh?"

"Legitimate drama, you mean. Topsy Touraine is trying it. She's with Miranda Jagg."

"Do you know Miss Jagg?"

"Only by sight. She's teaching Topsy a lot. I'm cleverer than Topsy."

"I don't believe Miss Jagg can teach you anything."

"It's very sweet of you to say that; but of course she can. Anyway, I can't break my agreement. I'm engaged till Christmas. Hullo! here we are!"

"We'll talk of this again," said Harry.

"Sit still! I can let myself in. Harry, I've always wanted a friend just like you. Good-night!"

"Good-night, dear!"

He did not offer to kiss her. She jumped lightly from the hansom, turned, waved her hand, and laughed.

"It's no use telling you to be good, because you always will be. Ta, ta!"

With that she vanished.

Twenty-four hours afterwards the detective called upon Harry at his lodging. Miss Esther Yorke was a probationer at Mrs. Tower's Nursing Home, near Wimpole Street.

"Sharp work," said Harry admiringly.

The inevitable note-book appeared.

"She landed at Southampton, travelled third class to Waterloo, took a 'bus, presumably, as far as Bedford Street, Strand, and then walked, perhaps, to Miss Jagg's Dramatic Academy."

"She saw Miss Jagg? You are sure of that?"

"You told me she was likely to call, having a box of clothes there. I had the house watched. She's been there twice at least."

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed our paladin. The duplicity of women confounded him. He could hardly believe that Miranda, such an understanding person, could have played him false. The detective received his cheque and Mr. Rye's thanks.

"If you want me again, sir——"

"I don't think I shall want you again," said Harry.

He spent a very bad quarter of an hour. If Mi-

randa knew, why did she hold her tongue? He had been quite frank with her. Unless his intelligence was gravely at fault Miranda liked him and esteemed him. Esther, then, persisted in hiding herself. Obviously such an amazing concealment could only be interpreted in one way. His mother had discovered the true reason.

Esther was unworthy!

Meantime she was provided for. Probationers in nursing homes do not starve. She had a loyal friend in Miss Jagg, certainly a remarkable actress. She wished to hide herself; and a gentleman must respect that wish. One of Harry's first thoughts was: "Would little Alice have played fast and loose with a great love?"

He did not go abroad, but he was seen nightly at the Terpsichore Theatre. To Lord and Lady Camber some harmless fibs were told. Lord Camber was engrossed with the fitting out of his yacht; and Harry kept discreetly out of Grosvenor Square. A fortnight later his uncle sailed for the West Indies.

After this our paladin accepted some shooting engagements; but he wrote to Alice at least twice a week, and she answered his letters by return of post. The world and his wife might have read those letters, which were indeed models of propriety. Alice's billets, as a matter of fact, were the joint composition of herself and Mrs. Snelling, a labour of love and ambition painstakingly accomplished with the help of a dictionary.

And then, upon the eve of Harry's departure for Buenos Ayres, a shocking cablegram reached London.

During a violent tempest in the Caribbean Sea, the *Albatross* had foundered, going down with all hands!

Miranda's instinct had not failed her. Harry succeeded to the family honours and estates, and the Diplomatic Service lost a faithful though not a brilliant servant. For the first time in his life our paladin found himself absolutely free to consider no will or wish other than his own. Accordingly we find him exhibiting a recklessness inherited from the blue-eyed guardsman and a chivalry which we know to be his particular attribute. For when Alice wrote a certain letter in which condolence struggled feebly with felicitation she added a postscript: "Of course, *now*, I shall never see you again!" And this postscript was nearly illegible, having been written by a hand that trembled, and below it Harry detected unmistakable signs of tears. It is due to Alice to state that when the tears fell she wished to rewrite the letter, but the wiser counsel of a mother prevailed. Three weeks later Henry George Augustus, Viscount Camber, was quietly married to Alice, eldest daughter of Albert Snelling, of Azalea Gardens, Clapham, S.W. The marriage created a sensation. The thoughtful pointed out that Miss Alice Godolphin was the seventeenth young lady who, beginning her career at the Jollity Theatre, had soared into the peerage. During the week that followed the announcement of the marriage the manager of the Jollity received more than a thousand applications from maidens of high and low degree desirous of becoming choristers. In the "profession" the axiom was established, "It pays to be good."

BOOK III

CHAPTER XV

AFTER FOUR YEARS

"WELL, Mr. Napier, can you guarantee a cure?"

Our paladin's wife spoke petulantly.

Sir Bedford Slufter answered: "Dear lady! Only quacks guarantee cures. Mr. Napier, we trust, will treat your case to a satisfactory issue."

"Upon certain terms," Napier added.

Sir Bedford bowed. Long before a baronetcy had been conferred upon him, he had safeguarded Harry Rye—it will be remembered—through sundry juvenile ailments. Now, admittedly, he was too big a swell for cases exacting sustained individual attention. Only personages had a first call upon his distinguished services. Short, broad, of over-ripe complexion, he was the antithesis of Napier, for whom he had ever-increasing respect as likely to rise high in his profession. Indeed, he had urged Lady Camber to put herself into Napier's hands, and had brought her to Harley Street in his own carriage. Lady Matilda Rye accompanied her daughter-in-law. This was the first visit, and an exhaustive examination had just been concluded.

"Upon certain terms, of course," repeated Sir Bedford.

"That's all right," said Alice; "Camber will pay any bill."

Sir Bedford slightly shrugged his shoulders. Napier smiled.

"We are not even remotely alluding to fees," muttered the elder man. He glanced at Napier, who nodded. "And now we doctors must have a word together—um?"

Lady Matilda rose, as Napier opened the door communicating with the library. Sir Bedford assisted Alice to her feet and presented an arm upon which princesses had leaned gratefully.

"I can't think why Harry is not here. He promised." She glanced at Lady Matilda, as if holding the mother personally responsible for the son's absence.

"If Harry promised, he'll be here," Lady Matilda answered resignedly.

"Meantime, let me prescribe tea," said Napier. "You will find it in the library. We will join you in five minutes."

Sir Bedford led the way, with Alice upon his arm. Lady Matilda followed. Alice was installed in an easy chair near the tea-table. Sir Bedford deftly slipped a cushion behind the invalid, turned out a too glaring electric light, and with a reassuring smile vanished.

"Old stoopid!" said Alice. "This Napier man seems clever, but he's cold as a last year's bird's nest. I wonder whether he ever saw me before I became a fright? I must ask him."

Lady Matilda glanced at her. Four years had greatly changed the captivating creature whom everybody had admired as Alice Godolphin. But she was not a fright yet. She looked terribly thin and ill:

nothing left—so Pony Harbottle said—but her eyes and the famous picture-postcard smile. Lady Matilda spoke of her daughter-in-law as a "wreck!" Harry's mother had changed also. Always plump, she had become voluminous. Her pretty easy manner was degenerating into an inept fussiness; her ready smile had become fatuous and bewildered. Secure in the possession of the handsome income settled upon her by our paladin, she had sought consolation among the fleshpots for the bitter disappointment caused by his marriage. Her face had lost its delicate colouring: it was now pink and puffy. She wore an everlasting grievance upon her sleeve. She had no grandchildren! It was really heart-breaking to reflect that her magnificent Harry remained without an heir when country curates were so injudiciously prolific.

Loyal to her son, although condemning him in her heart, she maintained, with pathetic insistence, that he had behaved chivalrously in rescuing the girl he loved from the abominations of a music-hall. Cophetua again! The beggar-maid had been good and beautiful, but ungrateful. She called herself an actress, but, seemingly, made no attempt to play the part of great lady. On the contrary, she appeared to take an impish delight in setting on edge the teeth of her elders and betters.

Within a year of marriage Lady Camber's health began to fail. Certain imprudences in the hunting-field had dashed to the ground Lady Matilda's hopes of holding a grandson in her arms. After this misadventure, anæmia exhibited itself. Also there was

mental trouble. Alice felt intolerably lonely. The paladin, with his usual generosity, had given to Mr. Snelling a sum of money large enough to enable that gentleman to leave Clapham and to establish himself and his family in Canada. Alice never saw her own relations. And neither Harry nor his mother suspected how dear the practice of her profession had been to Alice, how greatly she missed the nightly excitement, the applause, the flattering press notices, the joy of seeing herself upon posters and postcards. To please the man she loved she promised not to skirt-dance in drawing-rooms, nor to mimic worthy persons who might take offence thereat. Nine months out of the year were spent at Camber Castle, where hunting was the principal topic of conversation. Of course she moped. Perhaps Peach, now her confidential maid, summed up the situation when she muttered to her mistress: "You're one as'd sooner reign in 'Ell, than serve in Heving!" And Alice had replied sharply: "You know me better than any of 'em!"

Harry accepted his wife's weakness as emphasising and magnifying his own strength. When she fell ill, he played his part with patience and fortitude. His mother assured him that he was wonderful, an assurance he had no reason to doubt. But as the months passed he became rather bored with his perfections, and, when alone with his wife, exhibited an impatience and irritability valiantly suppressed in public. Finally, Sir Bedford Slufter intimated, with the tact and good feeling which made him *persona grata* in palaces, that the case was becoming serious. French and German

specialists were consulted, but Alice did not respond to treatment. The phrase was often in Harry's mouth, *She did not respond!* And she laughed at her doctors, poured their draughts out of the window, and disobeyed imperative instructions. Restlessness consumed her. Wherever she went, she chattered volubly, thrusting herself to the front, laughing too loudly, making grimaces, provoking the criticism of great ladies who had never accepted her as one of themselves.

During the interview in the consulting-room Napier had asked the usual questions. His glance dominated her. She replied truthfully enough, sensible that she dared not fib because this man would find her out. Lady Matilda sat beside her, listening resignedly, but saying nothing. Sometimes she wondered if Alice had any idea of how Harry's mother felt towards Harry's wife. She had always hated her daughter-in-law, with that intense, suppressed hatred of which some of the dearest little women in the world are capable. But not an outward sign betrayed it. At the wedding she had smiled upon the bride, and ever since, with a placidity which exasperated thoughtless persons like Constance Malplaquet, she had continued smiling.

"Of course you loathe her," Lady Malplaquet once remarked.

"My dear Connie!"

"Pouf-f-f! You know she's impossible."

"She is my Harry's wife."

From that impregnable position the unhappy mother never moved. Did she ever think of Esther, soft-voiced, tender-hearted, sincere? Who knows? Esther's

name never passed her lips but once. When Harry returned from his honeymoon, Lady Matilda received the young couple at Camber Castle. Alone with her son, she whispered: "Does Alice know about Esther?" Harry winced. And his fine eyes had a slightly furtive expression, as he answered: "She does not know. Why should I tell her? She is a jealous woman. It might make her unhappy."

"If someone told her—about that time in France."

Lady Matilda poured out the tea.

"No sugar for you, Alice, I believe."

"Three lumps, please."

"My dear! I thought Sir Bedford——"

"I'm under Mr. Napier now. Do I see crumpets?"

"Muffins. You will not be so unwise——"

"Mr. Napier has not forbidden muffins—yet. Please give me a muffin."

The door of the consulting-room opened. Sir Bedford entered first, pausing in amazement as he perceived his patient in the act of biting a piece out of a muffin.

"You are not eating muffins?" he gasped.

She ignored him, turning to Napier.

"Do you object to my making a good tea?"

"On the contrary," said Napier imperturbably.

"My dear Napier!"

"I always encourage my patients to eat large teas."

"Nice man!" exclaimed Alice.

Napier continued: "You see it may prevent them from eating still larger dinners."

Sir Bedford seemed to be struck by this point of view.

Alice nibbled her muffin, staring at Napier.

"Ever see me dance at the Jollity?" she asked Napier.

"I remember Miss Alice Godolphin perfectly," replied Napier.

"More tea, Alice?"

"Please don't shut me up, Lady Matilda. I'm not ashamed of having danced at the Jollity."

Sir Bedford interrupted suavely.

"Forgive me, but I am due at the Palace. The Princess is the most charming of women, but *exigeante*. And the Grand Duchess——"

"Before you go," said Alice tartly, "please tell me what's to be done with me?"

Sir Bedford cleared his throat and began mellifluously——

"Dear lady, you must place yourself unreservedly in Mr. Napier's hands. Speaking as his senior by some years, I can assure you that those hands of his are as skilful and kind as any pair in the profession."

Alice looked at Napier.

"What do you want me to do?"

"We shall send you back to Nature," said Sir Bedford.

"Nature? Do you mean camping out?"

"A rest-cure here."

"Here? In this house? Our own comfortable house in Grosvenor Square could be got ready."

"Even in Harley Street, Lady Camber, houses are not unprovided with comforts."

"I didn't mean that. If I must, I suppose I must. Can I have Peach?"

"Peach?"

"My old dresser. I told Harry I wouldn't take him unless he took Peach, too. No ordinary maid would stand my tantrums."

She laughed shrilly. Then Napier said in his quiet voice, so curiously authoritative and convincing: "If I undertake your case, you will see nobody for six weeks except myself and two trained nurses. We must exclude Peach and even Lord Camber."

"Why doesn't Harry come?" said Alice fretfully.

Lady Matilda murmured: "This rest-cure will be the very thing. We could never keep her quiet," she explained to Napier. Alice frowned and wriggled in her chair.

"Do women of my position leave their own houses?" she asked doubtfully.

Sir Bedford replied: "The Duchess of Belbury was Mr. Napier's guest and patient for two months."

This seemed to impress Alice. Her face brightened as she said sharply: "Why didn't you mention that before? Was the Duchess as thin as I am?"

"Thinner," said Napier.

"Come now, I can't believe that. Look here!" She lifted her skirt. "Broomsticks, I call 'em. And they used to be the most fetching in town. Eh, Mr. Napier?"

Napier replied: "I never saw a finer pair before or since."

"I say, Mr. Napier," continued Alice eagerly, "what did the Duchess weigh in at?"

"Seven stone three."

"And when she left you?"

"Ten stone five."

"Gracious! And you can give me the same room and attention?"

"The same rooms, the same attention, and the very best nurse in the kingdom."

"Then it's a go, if Harry will let me leave him." She stood up. "You've bucked me up enormously. I like you."

Napier bowed. Alice began to giggle.

"Standing is so bad for you," murmured Lady Matilda. Alice turned upon her savagely.

"There you go, shutting me up again. I—I——"

She burst into tears, but Sir Bedford dealt masterfully with the emergency. He half supported the hysterical woman from the room, murmuring the rare right word pat to a voluble lip.

Lady Matilda glanced at Napier and lifted her eyebrows.

"Will you take a hint, Mr. Napier?"

"As gladly as a guinea."

"Lady Camber has cried her life out for things my son couldn't give her."

"I understand."

"Lord Camber will be here in a few minutes. You have never met him?"

"Never."

"He has been wonderfully patient with her. But he believes her to be in a rapid decline."

"On that point I hope to reassure him."

"Then you think——" She paused, nervous beneath his steady gaze, sensible that an eager note had betrayed her.

"Lady Camber loves her husband," he said abruptly. There was no interrogation in his tone. "I have always understood it was a love match."

"Yes, yes," she answered, turning her eyes from his.

"Thank you for your hint."

"When do you wish Lady Camber to come here?"

"As soon as I can make the necessary arrangements. Good-bye."

He accompanied her as far as the door. Alone, his face changed, became softer, without losing, however, the tense look peculiar to men who love a fight for a fight's sake. A moment later he smiled; and his expression altered. The natural kindliness of the man, his humanity, his ever-increasing desire to mitigate suffering, shone out radiantly.

Opposite the consulting-room door was another door opening into a large laboratory built out at the back of the house. Napier touched a bell, answered by his confidential servant, Buckle.

"If Lord Camber calls, show him in here, Buckle. I am expecting Lady Arthur Freshwater by appointment. Show her ladyship into the consulting-room."

"Very good, sir."

Buckle disappeared. Napier looked at his watch. Then he crossed to the laboratory door, opened it, and said: "Miss Yorke."

Esther entered.

She wore a big pinafore, covering her gown, and in her hand was a memorandum-book. A mature woman of twenty-eight, she still retained a look of youth, although mere chocolate-box prettiness had gone out of her face. No one beholding her could doubt that she had passed through chastening ordeals. Her manner, once youthfully exuberant, had become quiet. She moved with a light, confident step which indicated discipline.

Napier sat down at his desk, while she stood at attention opposite, her eyes watchfully upon his, waiting for him to speak first.

"Any results?"

"Nothing positive. I've jotted down a few things."

She handed him the memorandum-book, at which he glanced. It was part of her daily duty to watch certain of his experiments during his enforced absences. He returned the book, nodding absently. Then he said abruptly:

"I've another nursing case for you, a very important one: something like the Duchess of Belbury's."

"Oh!"

"Only more complicated. We have functional heart trouble and anæmia. Sir Bedford Slufter is very pessimistic. Two Germans and one Frenchman have tried and failed."

"Makes it exciting for you."

"For us. You will have more to do with it than I. The patient is one of those nervous, restless, irritable creatures who require the most delicate handling. Frankly, I wouldn't undertake the case without you."

He spoke warmly, and Esther's eyes brightened.

"I shall begin to purr in a moment."

"You know I never flatter. Your tact, your patience, your good temper with the Duchess—eh?"

Esther was smiling. Napier tried to interpret this particular smile, not successfully. It baffled him, being compounded of interest, amusement, and a certain deprecating derision. Esther said lightly:

"I suppose Sir Hubert Stanley only praised when he wanted something very badly. You half promised me that there was to be no more nursing. Are you dissatisfied with my work in the laboratory?"

"On the contrary."

"Will it be day- or night-work?"

"Day, but you can sleep here. That will make it easier for you."

"I can't sleep here."

"As you please. I can count on you, eh?"

"Of course."

"Thanks." Then, in a different voice, he added: "I knew I could."

She eyed him more intently. She had come to accept his physical defects, the frail body, the too pale face, the awkward movements, as emphasising and indeed embellishing the fine head. But, hitherto, with a certain perversity of mental vision, she had insisted

upon regarding Napier as a mechanic rather than a man. And she had perceived from the first—not without amusement—that he regarded women as machines necessary to carry on the principal business of the planet. He could take them to pieces and put them together again. Often she had wondered whether he would ever own one. Upon occasion Napier spoke of affinities other than those technically chemical. But here, again, he preferred to deal with abstractions. He asked no personal questions; he never spoke of himself as apart from his work. Esther dared not affirm that he was happy in his work, but he took delight in talking about it and around it. She had come to him at a critical moment, upon the very eve of his discovery of the now famous vegetable alkaloid, Talin, which he had succeeded in isolating from a newly-discovered South-American plant. Esther, indeed, had a finger in the wonderful pie. And she had beheld him, as in the picture at the New Gallery, test-tube in hand, gazing intently at a colourless fluid which represented years of thought and months of labour. Talin was a poison which left no traces in the human system, but was likely to prove, in infinitesimal doses, a remedial agent of the highest value. Since its discovery Esther and he had been searching for a reagent, without which its introduction to the Pharmacopœa must be reckoned perilous in the extreme.

Esther hesitated—then she said:

"I suppose you know I loathe nursing?"

She spoke with a vehemence which surprised Napier. He, for his part, regarded Esther as the heaven-born

nurse trained by Mrs. Tower to perfection. Out of all the nurses in London he had chosen her to be his assistant in the treatment of the Duchess. This illustrious patient tried to kill both of them. Napier said afterwards that the pounds of good solid flesh with which he covered her bones had been taken from Esther and himself. Upon Esther, he was well aware, the strain had been terrific. She had broken down under it. Accordingly, he insisted upon a long holiday, and then offered her a well-paid position in his laboratory. For more than four months she worked beneath his roof. In a sense, not unpleasing to either, she became part of the laboratory, part of his work, and a part, moreover, which animated the whole unmistakably. He acclaimed in her automatic accuracy and self-reliance, the result, really, of three years' training under Mrs. Tower. It had tickled Esther's sense of humour to perceive how greatly this veneer imposed upon Napier, who took for granted that she was solid all through. She had wondered whether he would be shocked when he found her out, and envisaged the real woman.

"You loathe nursing?"

Esther laughed. Really, he must be made to see certain things.

"You are amazed. You believe that I like nursing. I'm naturally pleasure-loving. I adore pretty things. I hate plain food, and plain people, and plain talk."

"This is plain talk, Miss Yorke. Won't you sit down? Let us have it out."

"I shall be glad to have it out, because for weeks I've been sailing under false colours."

"You are fond of pretty things?"

Obviously the speaker had a mild contempt for pretty things.

"Fond! The absence of the pretty things I used to have has made me too fond of them. And now, as a penance, I hang about counters where anything and everything is offered for ninepence."

"I used to hang about the tuppenny bookstalls when I was a medical student."

At his sympathetic tone a slight colour flowed into her cheeks. Had each of them, with guileless misapprehension, reckoned the other to be a machine? They were silent, half bewildered by new and strange speculations, when Buckle entered, followed by a tall, distinguished-looking man.

"Lord Camber," he announced, adding, "Lady Arthur Freshwater is in the consulting-room."

Napier stood up and greeted his visitor, before he said to the butler, "Tell her ladyship that I will be with her immediately."

Esther half turned aside, as yet unrecognised by the lover from whom she had fled four years before, whom she had not set eyes on since. Her first instinct was to slip from the room. Her heart began to throb, and weakness attacked her knees: that paralysing, unreasoning fear which, years before, had assailed her in Piccadilly Circus, and again and again afterwards, but never of late. She heard Napier's voice: "You will excuse me, but I must see Lady Arthur?" and Harry's familiar tones: "Yes, yes; I am sorry to be late; I'm in no hurry. I——" He broke off. Esther knew

that he had seen her. Summoning her fortitude, she raised her eyes.

"Miss Yorke!" he exclaimed.

His tone barely challenged Napier's attention, nothing more. He guessed that Esther Yorke and Camber had not met for some years; and, knowing nothing of their past relations, divined that there might be a slight mutual embarrassment.

Esther held out her hand with admirable self-control.

"Miss Yorke is an old acquaintance of mine," Harry explained.

His boldness saved the situation, but it frightened Esther. Harry was bigger, and looked formidable.

Napier said: "Then I shall leave you together for five minutes." Abruptly he nodded, and hurried into the consulting-room.

Harry approached Esther, with a ponderous inevitableness which suggested an advancing fate. She did not shrink, but inwardly she quailed, seeing interrogation in eyes not so clear nor so finely coloured as they used to be, but more masterful. In a flash she comprehended that he had changed, and that his self-confidence, never too small, had swollen to monstrous dimensions.

"What are you doing here?" he said.

CHAPTER XVI

ESTHER JUSTIFIES EXPECTATION

SHE answered demurely, "I work in the laboratory."

He glanced about him. The room was austerely furnished, the library of a man scornful of accessories. Books, not conspicuous for fine bindings, lined the walls. The chairs and tables were of mahogany, substantial but not beautiful. Through the open door of the laboratory Harry could see whitewashed walls, a long deal table covered with apparatus, retorts, rows of test-tubes, crucibles, and such chemists' gear.

"I heard you had become a nurse; you always wished to earn your own living."

"And I have done it."

A note of triumph displeased him. He perceived that the spirit crushed by outrageous fortune reanimated her again under happier conditions.

"You treated me without much consideration," he murmured, with a side glance at the door of the consulting-room. Then he added, "I shall not refer to that again."

"Thank you."

Obviously he wished her to be impressed by his magnanimity and indifference. He had the air of a magnate who could afford to overlook misconduct in a social inferior, and who was aware that his smile to a mere breadwinner meant encouragement, a benedic-

tion, and his frown—chastisement. Esther continued, after a moment's hesitation, "You think I behaved shabbily, but that is because you can't get outside yourself. After all, why should you?"

"What do you mean?" She had always known that his wits worked slowly. Time had not quickened their action.

"You are so big, a person of such importance. How can you stand in my shoes?"

"You are laughing at me!"

"If I could, if I did, ought a lion to grudge such tiny compensation to a mouse? Meeting you again, knowing to what dizzy heights you have climbed, I might well laugh at the irony of things, for I have a sense of humour, my lord." She dropped him a curtsey. Of course he could not see beneath a pitiful attempt to speak lightly. He pronounced her frivolous, a coquette, and thus condemning her was more sensible of her charm than ever. Because she did not cringe, he said, almost rudely, "When is this doctor coming back?"

At his words fear again assailed her. Why was Harry here? She had seen even bigger and stronger men walk into hospitals and consulting-rooms.

"You are not ill, are you?"

"Would you care tuppence if I was? Ill? I never was so fit."

"Then why are you here?"

"To meet my wife. I was delayed at the club."

"Is Lady Camber ill?"

"She is very ill indeed," he answered. "For three

years we have tried everything and everybody. It has been terrible for her and for me. I have almost lost hope."

"I'm so sorry, I—I——" She broke off, seeing, so to speak, two and two, but unable to make four of them.

"However, they tell me this Napier is a miracle-worker."

"Good Heavens!"

"What's the matter?" He spoke more kindly.

"I have just promised to nurse your wife!"

His face hardened again, as he perceived that something other than his personal distress had moved her. He looked at her steadily, beholding in her a more subtle and alluring beauty. If she nursed his wife he would see her! He had just touched the fringe of this not unpleasant conviction, when he felt her fingers upon his sleeve, and her low, soft voice murmured, "Of course I shall withdraw."

"And give this doctor the reason?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

"Because I forbid you to tell a stranger something which intimately concerns me. I don't want outsiders to know that you made a fool of me. And besides——"

"Well?"

"There is another reason; my wife knows nothing of what passed in France."

"Surely she has heard my name?"

"I don't think so. We were never engaged. People have forgotten. My wife is an intensely jealous woman, and in her present state of health the least

thing drives her wild with hysteria. For her sake, for my sake, find some other excuse. Personally, if it is your profession, I see no reason why you shouldn't nurse my wife."

"Mr. Napier is coming back."

She had heard the tinkle of a distant bell, and, an instant later, Napier entered the library. He approached Harry, and said quickly, "Odd thing you should know Miss Yorke. Has she told you that she has promised to nurse Lady Camber?"

"Yes," said Harry.

Immediately Esther returned to the laboratory, leaving the two men alone. Napier said with enthusiasm:

"The very best nurse in London, bar none."

"Indeed." His air of constraint slightly puzzled Napier, but he supposed that Harry was thinking of his wife. His next words gave colour to this. "You have formed some opinion already?"

"Oh, yes. Happily, Lady Camber has youth on her side. But she must place herself in my hands for at least six weeks. I cannot permit even you to see her."

"As you will. Brains and money in combination——"

"And something more, Lord Camber."

He spoke gravely. Instantly our paladin became sensible that a demand was to be made upon him; as instantly he responded, because we know what an appetite he had for the good opinion of his fellows. Napier impressed him favourably.

"Anything I can do—you have only to speak."

"Brains and money together do work miracles, but brains and money seem to have failed to restore Lady Camber's health."

"True, true!" Since he had become a distinguished ornament of the House of Lords, our Harry had cultivated a slightly impressive manner, well suited to a man approaching the prime of life, and beginning to be recognised as a pillar of the State. In the cartoon of him which appeared in "Mayfair" he is represented in peer's robes and coronet, with the superscription, *A Legislator*. One felt that he could and would lay down the law.

"At the end of six weeks I hope that Lady Camber will be strong enough to see you. Everything will depend then on you."

"On—me?"

He repeated the words to gain time, for Napier's frankness was upsetting. Positively this fellow as good as hinted that till now the husband had not done his part.

"On you," said Napier. He saw that he stood on thin ice, and skated swiftly over it. "I may be wrong," he continued, "but, to-day, meeting Lady Camber for the first time, I gathered from a certain defiance of voice and manner that life is not very alluring to her."

"In her wretched state of health how could it be alluring?"

"If I'm any judge of character, I'm sure that Lady Camber is of an affectionate disposition. If that is true, I count on your cordial co-operation."

"You shall have it," said Harry heartily, holding out his hand, which Napier grasped with warmth. In the doctor's eyes lay the expression so familiar to our paladin: the recognition of the right thing indicated by the modest word. Harry walked solidly upright towards the door, paused, and returned. The look upon his handsome face was now not so easy to interpret. To the keen eyes watching him there seemed to be a flicker—one could call it nothing else—of furtiveness.

"If Slufter and those foreigners are right——?"

Napier said nothing.

"If—if she does not recover, tell me the worst; I can bear it. If things do not go right, how long will it be before——"

He broke off with agitation. Napier was thinking, He does love this poor creature! The slightly furtive look had vanished. Unmistakable emotion thrilled Harry's voice. Napier answered slowly:

"Such questions are very difficult to answer, Lord Camber."

"Man! don't fence with me! I want to know how I stand. Is this terrible, grinding uncertainty to go on for ever and ever?"

"The next month will make an enormous difference. If Lady Camber is amenable to my treatment, I can promise her a new lease of life. But," his voice changed, "if she is not——"

"Yes?"

"The end must inevitably be soon."

In silence Harry left the room. Napier touched the bell, and then crossed to the laboratory door. As

he opened it and summoned Esther, there was an inflection of triumph in his voice, as if he knew positively that he would succeed where others had failed.

Esther came in wearing a hat, and gloved. The hat was new and became her vastly well. Seeing Napier's glance, she said with a forced smile:

"You like my new hat?"

"Very much."

"Wise women put their savings into a penny bank; I've put mine into a hat."

"Spendthrift!" He gave an ambiguous laugh, and continued in a different tone, "This Camber case interests me enormously. You are not in a hurry, are you? No? Good!" He placed a chair for her, but did not sit himself. Instead he paced slowly up and down, his habit when deeply moved or excited. Esther watched him, with half-averted eyes. He burst out vehemently:

"I must save this woman. Did you ever see her dance?"

"Never!"

"An enchanting creature! So graceful, so pretty —and a capital mimic! At the time of the marriage worldly people sneered at Camber. But I respect him. He married the girl he loved in defiance of public opinion. And then, I take it, he made his first great mistake. He tried to turn her, or she tried to turn herself, into somebody else—a great lady. How absurd! I had a hint from the mother. Lady Camber has cried her life out for the things that her husband

could not give her; but she loves him and he loves her."

"Ah!" said Esther.

"I'm very sorry for Camber. Unless his wife is transformed into what she was, the best thing that could happen for everybody concerned would be——" He completed his sentence with a gesture. Then, triumphantly, he added: "But we're going to transform her into what she was."

"Mr. Napier?"

"Yes?"

"I've been thinking that I can't undertake this case."

He stood still, staring at her, astounded.

"You refuse to help me! Why?"

In her nervousness and confusion she made an idiotic answer, "I don't feel up to it."

He repeated the words contemptuously:

"You don't feel *up* to it?"

"I told you I loathed nursing."

He examined her attentively, frowning, and pulling at his chin.

"You are quite strong again, surely?"

"Thanks to you, yes."

"And free? No ties?"

"Free for ever and ever."

Then she laughed, thinking of her freedom, and what it meant. Was freedom always a synonym for slavery? She had emancipated herself in one sense, but she remained and must remain bound to the drudgery of uncongenial tasks, of a life of hard work.

"Why do you laugh, Miss Yorke?"

"Is anybody really free in this world?"

"Have you been unhappy here?"

The kindliness of his voice moved her, but she had come to recognise this as a warming wine, always, so to speak, on tap. He spoke kindly to everybody, because he was interested in everybody. With an effort she replied evasively:

"I've enjoyed my luncheons here very much."

"I'm glad."

"The food was *so* good!" He appeared disconcerted. She went on at random, "And I'm so greedy!"

"You say you loathe nursing, but do you loathe the results of such nursing as yours?" She remained silent. He continued incisively, "Do you think that I enjoy certain parts of my work? But the rewards are ours. I don't speak of money or honours."

"I know that, Mr. Napier."

"We have great moments. To see what can be done, and to do it. Ah! That is worth while. And I thought that you——" He broke off, trying to read her. Shamefacedly, she met his eyes, and then, unable to bear their interrogation, lowered her lids. She heard him say, "You regard me as your friend?"

"I am proud to be your friend, Mr. Napier, if only in a laboratory."

"A laboratory?"

He reflected that he knew nothing of her outside the laboratory.

"One doesn't expect to find friendship in a laboratory."

"Even romance may be found in such an unlikely place."

"Wouldn't iodoform destroy its fragrance? I am rather a weak woman, Mr. Napier. Does that surprise you very much?"

He answered gravely, in striking contrast to the attempted lightness of her tone and manner:

"I'm thirty-eight. Nothing surprises me very much. I regard surprise in a medical man as a sort of twin to ignorance. Weak, are you?"

"I have to consider myself. It is vital to me to keep my health. If this is a case like the duchess's——"

"More difficult."

"Then I cannot risk another breakdown. I am very sorry."

Deliberately she averted her eyes.

"I sha'n't let you break down. Come, come; I won't take a refusal. I couldn't have believed that you would desert me, or flinch from a good fight. It will be a good fight, believe me."

"There are dozens of other nurses."

"I've told you that this is not a case for an ordinary nurse. It will be your duty to straighten a warped mind."

She stood up, trembling and irresolute:

"I can't," she murmured weakly.

He laid his hands upon her shoulders; she could feel the pressure of his fingers upon them, and flowing from them his irresistible will dominating and overwhelming hers. One reason alone, the true one, would

be accepted as adequate: all others would be treated as straws to be pushed aside.

"I know you better than you know yourself. You are not going to back out of this. You are *not*, I say."

His courage began to animate her. If her services were really indispensable——! And if—a more insidious thought—if any effort on her part could wipe out that vast unpaid indebtedness to Harry, ought she to hesitate? Might not this be regarded as a Heaven-sent opportunity? She owed much to Napier; more, infinitely more, to Harry. Each demanded a service at her hands.

"Very well; I will not back out!" she said impetuously.

Her sudden surrender had fascination in it. He was pleased and touched, but he divined a reticence. Surely a woman of her character and intelligence had a better reason for trying to withdraw than the one she had offered.

"I knew you couldn't and wouldn't. Together we'll pull her through, eh?"

His note was triumphant, that of a conqueror; but she answered with a vague sense of impending disaster, with the more clearly defined conviction that her instincts had been too ruthlessly crushed:

"Perhaps."

CHAPTER XVII

MIRANDA WRITES A LETTER

LEAVING Harley Street, Esther walked to Oxford Circus, and thence down Regent Street. A Londoner born and bred, she adored this huge, wonderful city, not for its architecture, not for its squares and parks, but for its unexpectedness, its romance, its intimate charm and colour and ever-varying light and shade. Most of all she loved it when night was closing in, when the myriad lamps flickered out of misty vistas, twinkling like fireflies in an Italian *podere*. Most strivers share this subtle pleasure in "lighting-up" time. For one reason, it proclaims their release from toil, the end of a dull drab day, spent in ill-ventilated, ill-lit rooms, in the pursuit of a monotonous and exhausting occupation. The light is indeed "kindly" to all of us who are constrained to live in "encircling gloom!"

It was late October, and the winter season had begun. Already the smart women were arrayed in furs. Esther never saw a fine set of sables without reflecting with a pang that she had sold hers to keep the hat-shop open a few weeks longer, a wicked waste of time and material. She swung along briskly, pausing now and again to peer into shop windows, for many years a never-failing source of entertainment. It amused her to select the best of everything and, in fancy, to buy it regardless of cost. Thus, having

glutted, so to speak, imagination, she would, with a humorous realisation of facts as they were, spend a few pence or shillings upon the humblest wares. As a rule, she shunned these gorgeous thoroughfares, because they aroused emotional regrets which she condemned. In a sane and philosophical mood, she would return home by Charing Cross Road, for example; the shorter route, indeed, and one commended by Miranda Jagg, with whom she lived.

She bought a bunch of chrysanthemums in Piccadilly Circus, and, passing one of the famous theatres, noticed that Laura Jagg was advertised in letters of fire as about to appear in a new play.

Laura Jagg!

The mere mention of the famous actress's name aroused murderous thoughts. Laura earned fifty guineas a week at least, but Miranda, failing in health and fortune, never received a sixpence out of this princely salary. And yet, in a sense, Laura owed her first start in life to the elder sister. The Iron Duke, we have been given to understand, was under similar obligations to the head of his family, but on the morning of his brother's death, he is reported to have said, "Lord Wellesley is dead. An agreeable man, when he had his own way!"

Esther might have offered to Napier one reasonable excuse for refusing to nurse Lady Camber. At night she was often called upon to minister to her old friend. She was aware also that Miranda's illness four months before had been the real cause of her own breakdown. Napier never guessed that his pet nurse, in defiance of

Mrs. Tower's ironclad rules, was devoting her mind and body to *two* patients. Nor did Miranda suspect at the time what inordinate demands the Duchess of Belbury had imposed upon a too-willing attendant.

Esther ascended the steep stairs leading to the saloon. The typewriting machines were ticking furiously as of yore, proclaiming—so it always seemed to Esther—the grim gospel of unremitting work for the millions of which she was an insignificant unit; and, as she reached the first floor, one of the young ladies came out, carrying a sheaf of script in her hand. She had worked here for nearly five years. Esther could remember her as a pretty girl, with round, soft, rosy cheeks. Now she was thin and pale, with an indelible wrinkle between her eyes, and hollows where the dimples had been. Esther wondered if she herself had aged as rapidly. Had Harry noticed an enormous change? She would like to know.

Miranda lay upon the sofa. She had four pupils, but each day her efforts to teach them seemed to leave her exhausted. Nevertheless her indomitable pluck was even more remarkable than before.

Esther presented the chrysanthemums; Miranda's eyes sparkled.

"Something has happened."

"Yes," said Esther.

She knew that Miranda would squeeze the last drop of information out of her, and that it would be fatuous to procrastinate, or to try to hide the truth.

"I have met Lord Camber."

She took off the new hat, eyed it with comparative indifference, and placed it on the table.

"How dramatic!"

"For a moment, yes. I was terrified, but I pulled myself together. Certainly I am stronger than I used to be."

"I should hope so. Go on!"

"I found myself talking to him with really remarkable composure. His wife is very ill. I have promised to nurse her."

"You have promised to nurse Alice Godolphin! You are an extraordinary young woman."

"No longer young."

"How did your Harry look?"

Esther poured herself out a cup of tea, frowning.

"I wish you wouldn't speak of him as mine; it's so absurd."

"I can't believe he ever belonged to Alice Godolphin. Has he altered much?"

Both women had followed our paladin's career since his marriage and accession to the throne of his fathers, but they only knew what the British public knew, that he had justified expectation. What his world demanded of him he had done. He was Lord-Lieutenant of his county, and approved everywhere as a model landlord, sportsman, Christian, and gentleman.

"He wears a coat of more serious cut."

"Did you promise to nurse his wife to oblige him?"

"No—to oblige Mr. Napier."

"Ah—ha! We are beginning to like Mr. Napier."

"He forced my hand. I simply couldn't refuse."

She described what had passed, presenting her story, as Miranda liked it, dramatically. Miranda listened, shaking her head and emitting grunts of incredulity. At the end Esther said:

"It's a great opportunity to pay off part of my debt to Harry."

"How do you propose to do it?"

"I shall nurse his wife as woman was never nursed before."

"Um!"

"Miranda, you look horribly wicked. What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that if you really wish to pay the bill in full, you'd better pop one of these poisons you've been tinkering with into your patient's milk."

"Miranda!"

"I thought you'd be shocked. What an innocent you are still! Do you really believe that this man wants that wretched creature to live?"

"What an abominable question!"

"He married her out of pique, because he couldn't get you. He couldn't have done a stupider thing. These musical comedy girls are not ladies, and we know they're not actresses. They can't even pretend to be ladies. I'm very sorry for your Harry, always was. That he is a bit of a fool is no disability. You would have looked after him nicely. And the cards have always said that you and he would come together. First and last he wanted to marry you."

"Last rather than first," murmured Esther.

"If Alice Godolphin is in a rapid decline——"

"I've not seen her yet."

"The cleverest men in France and Germany have given her up, you say?"

"But Mr. Napier hasn't."

"He couldn't save Sabrina. When our time comes we must go. I've never forgiven Alice Godolphin—never!"

"Miranda, dear, please!"

Miranda laughed harshly. At rare moments such as these her coarseness distressed Esther. Always Miranda exploited thoughts which delicately-minded women hardly dare to entertain secretly. Esther had the feeling that if the issues of life and death lay with her old friend she would turn down her thumbs without an instant's hesitation. Had not Sabrina said that Miranda was a Pagan?

"Is this nursing to be day-work or night?"

"Day, of course! You don't think——"

"Go on. You won't? Very well. I am not to think that you would leave me. Why shouldn't you leave me? I'm strong again."

Esther did not answer. She poured out a second cup of tea, with an obstinate look upon her face; then she said tartly:

"Your sister is going to play at the Deucalion."

"Is she?" Miranda looked ten years younger. "I suppose the other woman is ill. What a bit of luck! Laura will have an immense success in that part. This is great news—glorious news!"

The utter absence of any jealousy, this unfeigned delight in the continued good fortune of a sister who

had behaved with the blackest ingratitude, stirred Esther to the depths. Loyalty, fidelity, sincerity—what soul-satisfying qualities these were!

She heard Miranda glorifying the talent of her sister Laura, but Esther was thinking of Harry: once her lover, then her friend and benefactor, her saviour, not to put a fine point on it, and now—what? She saw him, monumentally impressive, as he had turned to meet Napier. She knew that this attitude had become natural to him. What price had he paid to acquire it? It was awful to reflect that he might have sought this and little else during four years—the perfection of an attitude!

And his wife?

A mordant curiosity possessed her to see the woman whose place she might have filled, the woman whom more than once she had envied. Yes, envied! The first year at the nursing home had been very strenuous. There had been moments, dismal moments, when she told herself passionately that she had been a fool. But there had been other moments too—the great moments to which Napier had alluded—when she knew that she had been wise, and that the struggle against wind and tide was developing and strengthening her into an entity whom Sabrina would not be ashamed to greet upon the farther shore. For Esther had been living a life which constrained her to think much and often of that farther shore for which she had seen many, old and young, set sail. It would be unwise to affirm that nurses are especially religious. To many they may appear, apart from the practice of their profession,

amazingly light-hearted, and even frivolous. Why not? Some reaction is inevitable and natural. But when they are watching and waiting for the end, counting the last breaths, marking the supreme change, can we doubt that then they are drawn into a more intimate communion with what is Eternal and Omnipotent? From the hour when Esther had been forced to live for others, her sympathies had widened, and her knowledge of what life is had become in itself vital, because she had gazed so often upon death.

Of what nature would be this new relation between herself and Harry and Harry's wife? She knew now, without a scintilla of doubt, that she had never loved the paladin; and, naturally, he must have lost long ago any love he might have had for her. Because of that she would be able to nurse his wife. Otherwise the situation would have been impossible. Nevertheless, the liabilities frightened her, the more so because they were vague and amorphous.

"You are not listening to a word I'm saying!" declared Miranda.

"I am not," Esther confessed, smiling. "When you rave about your sister Laura I am frankly bored."

"Then we will talk about you and your affairs. If you are going to nurse a fractious, hard-to-please patient, I protest violently against your sleeping here. These are my rooms, and I give you notice to quit."

As if to demonstrate the notable improvement in her condition, she attempted to rise from the sofa. Immediately Esther sprang to her assistance, but was waved magnificently aside.

"There!" exclaimed Miranda, standing up.

Esther turned a soft glance upon her friend's stout, ungainly figure, now racked by rheumatic pains. Often, as she was aware, Miranda had to lie still wherever she might be because she couldn't get up.

"What do you suppose I do when you ain't here, eh?"

Esther answered coolly: "I happen to know what you do. You hammer on the floor with your stick, and one of the girls downstairs comes up."

"Pish!" said Miranda, walking unsteadily across the saloon.

"You are not fit to be left alone at night," continued Esther, speaking with professional curtness and finality, "so let us have no more nonsense. I am going upstairs. You had better lie down again."

"I must write a letter first."

Esther discerned a twinkle as Miranda sat down heavily upon the chair by her desk. She laughed, crossed the room, kissed Miranda, and said:

"You are an old duck, but you do fib horribly."

Miranda's eyes twinkled again as Esther left the room to set about preparations for their simple supper. Then, almost furtively, she wrote as follows:

DEAR SIR,—I conceive it my duty to inform you that I was the very unwilling cause of Miss Yorke's breakdown after nursing the Duchess of Belbury. At the time I was suffering with a severe attack of inflammatory rheumatism, from which I am happy to say I have recovered. I am now perfectly able to look after myself by night or day. You will do me a favour and Miss Yorke a real service if you will insist upon her sleeping in your house, where she will get proper food and attention. Here

she insists upon playing the parts of house-maid, parlour-maid, and cook. Faithfully yours,

MIRANDA JAGG.

P.S.—You can show this letter to Miss Yorke if necessary.

Having sealed this letter and stamped it, she directed it to Napier, and then tapped on the floor with the famous clouded cane which had been used by Charles James when he played Sir Peter Teazle. One of the typewriting young ladies answered the tap, slightly out of breath, for she had run upstairs.

"I want you to post this yourself, my dear. And, look here, you begin early and work late. Where do you live?"

"Happy Hampstead, Miss Jagg."

"Indeed. A far cry from Covent Garden. And the nights close in early. Would it be a convenience to sleep here for, say a couple of months?"

The young lady jumped at such a chance. Within five minutes arrangements satisfactory to each party had been made. The young lady whisked off, and Miranda sat down to play patience, with a view to discover the intentions of Fate in regard to the nursing of Lady Camber by Esther Yorke. The patience "came out" satisfactorily from a pagan point of view. Miranda smiled grimly, sensible that if she could see Esther in the robes of a peeress she could turn her face to the wall and expire without vain repinings.

"The dear child would look beautiful in a tiara," she murmured, as she reshuffled the cards.

CHAPTER XVIII

OUR PALADIN FLIRTS WITH OPPORTUNITY

NAPIER received Miranda's letter early next morning. It coloured a new Esther, whose better acquaintance he felt an absurd impatience to make. Absurd because, after all, what was Hecuba to him? A clever, light-fingered assistant; a nurse with gifts for dealing tactfully with petulant, disagreeable patients. Was she anything more? It surprised him that he should be obliged to ask such a question. It annoyed him that he was unable to answer it offhand, with an emphatic and contemptuous "Nothing!" Admittedly she was "Something," an organism to be studied, or rather an organism that might repay study, and which might—the possibility was barely glimpsed—baffle study. Thinking of her while shaving, he cut his chin, whereat he had been unduly exasperated.

Punctually at ten Esther arrived, and, with a curt nod of greeting, took up the work of the previous day. Napier, at the other end of the laboratory, watched her out of curious eyes, trying to perceive the halo which she had been at pains to hide from him. Why did she lay such stress upon the material side of life? Why did she prattle about pretty things? She was pretty herself. No, not pretty: a detestable adjective that! She had been pretty. Now she exhibited charm,

distinction, a matured beauty of expression, which he had never remarked before. He wondered whether many men had fallen in love with this attractive creature. And, if so, why, in the Sphinx's name, had she not consented to make one of them happy?

"About this case of ours," he began abruptly.

"Yes?"

She stood to attention, quietly impassive.

"I've been thinking that you must sleep here."

"Sorry, but I can't."

"Have others a claim upon your time?" he saw that his quickness had startled her, but he went on smoothly: "Is it quite fair to our patient?"

"Did I leave anything undone for the duchess?"

"You left yourself undone. You insisted upon sleeping at home. I ought to have forbidden it flatly. This time I *must* be obeyed."

She confronted him valiantly, struck, not for the first time, by the look of power upon his face, its ascetic quality, its nobility of line. Then she said, smiling:

"It's quite impossible, Mr. Napier."

Her obstinacy impressed a man accustomed to have his own way with nurses and under-strappers. In silence he handed to her Miranda's letter.

"You see I know all about it." When she had read the letter and was still staring at it, realising that she had been outwitted, he said slily: "So you are an altruist behind the scenes, although you play the pleasure-seeker before me."

She made no answer.

"The two *rôles* are not incompatible. In seeking happiness for others you may have found it for yourself."

"Unfortunately—I haven't. Well, I am cornered, and I suppose I must obey."

"Of course."

"Miss Jagg hates strangers," said Esther, with seeming irrelevance.

"Miss Jagg must have other friends. I'm not going to scold you, but you make a mistake in thinking yourself indispensable to her."

"Nobody is indispensable."

"That is going too far. You are indispensable in this particular case, and I shall see to it that you have the food you like, and a pretty room, and a larger fee."

"You are very kind."

"It's not altogether a matter of business."

His tone rather than the words challenged her attention. Napier said slowly: "You are capable of great things; because of that you deserve small things. Off duty, I hope you will try to look upon me as your host and my house as your home."

Not waiting for an answer, he turned his back and went out of the laboratory.

Two days later Alice was installed upon the spacious first floor, and the rest-cure began its tedious course. Alice lay in bed, absorbing immense quantities of milk. Twice a day she was massaged. She saw nobody but Napier, Esther, the night-nurse, and the

masseuse. She was not allowed to read or write or to receive letters.

From the first moment of meeting, Esther exercised a curious dominion over her, the greater because absolutely unsuspected by Alice herself. One of her first remarks had been:

"So you are a lady!"

"Who isn't nowadays?"

"I'm not," replied Alice sharply. "That's the trouble. That's what made skin and bone of me. I mean to talk to you as I talk to my maid Peach, who used to be my dresser in the good old days. We're both common. I used to pretend that I was too sweet for anything, but I couldn't keep it up, particularly with my husband's relations. If you have met Lady Matilda Rye you can guess what I've had to put up with since I married."

"I have met Lady Matilda."

"Have you? Then you know that she's a cat, although she keeps her claws out of sight. She hates me, and she thinks I don't know it!" Alice began to tremble with a sort of suppressed rage, which showed only too plainly how weak she was. Esther, obliged to take a definite line, did not attempt to treat her like a child.

"I am glad you are going to be quite frank with me," she said quietly. "But you know, of course, that I'm under ironclad instructions. We can talk together, in moderation at first, upon the one condition that you don't get excited."

"Did the duchess get excited?"

"At first, it seemed hopeless even to try to soothe her. But she hadn't your brains."

"How do you know I've brains?"

"If you had been a doll you would have been satisfied with dressing-up and playing the great lady. You have been miserable because, being an artist, you were cast for the wrong part."

"I believe we shall get on," said Alice. "Crikey! I'm lucky in getting you for a nurse."

Esther had achieved a small triumph, but she wondered whether Lady Camber's affection and confidence might not become oppressive. Obviously of an expansive nature, she would insist, perhaps, on talking about Harry. Avowedly not a lady, she might say—anything. Next day the paladin rose largely above the horizon, appearing at ten in the morning, not with the milk, but with a charming nosegay of violets. In oblations of this sort he was never found wanting.

Alice knew that Esther and Harry were not strangers. The ex-Secretary of Legation had mentioned discreetly and indifferently that, by rather an odd coincidence, Napier's pet nurse happened to be an old acquaintance. Alice listened with a yawn. Not till she met Esther in the flesh did she evince the slightest interest in her.

"Do you know Lord Camber well?" she had asked.

"Fairly well."

"How long have you known him?"

"Let me think. I saw him play cricket against Harrow."

"Are you as old as that? You don't look old."

"I feel old," said Esther.

"He is very handsome, don't you think so?"

"Very."

"I fell in love with him the first day I saw him—head over heels; the worst case! People are either angels or devils with me. I like you most awfully. I've had nurses before, but I hated 'em. They were all on the make! They didn't care a hang for me. But you're different. You are really interested in me."

"It's true; I am interested enormously. Mr. Napier is interested, too. We want to give you back a new body, a new mind, a new point of view."

Esther spoke with enthusiasm, but Alice's face indicated disappointment.

"Is your interest only professional?" she asked.

"Certainly not. It is time for the milk."

"Ugh! How I hate milk!"

"Please."

The nurse insisted, holding out the nauseating draught, never to be poured out of window, always to be drained to the last drop.

"And now you must try to sleep."

The first and most difficult week passed more quickly and smoothly than either Esther or Napier had dared to expect. Alice, however, was so feeble in body that any sustained resistance to two strong wills became almost a physical impossibility.

"She will make it lively later," said Napier. "Her ladyship's manners are not unimpeachable, are they?"

"She is not as rude, or as ungrateful, or as stupid as the poor duchess."

"She has taken a fancy to you. Use that as a lever. By the way, the husband rather bores me. Would you mind seeing him when he calls? He suggested it."

"Oh!" said Esther, with a tiny gasp.

"Have I asked anything extraordinary?"

"Of course not."

"I fancied you gasped."

"Perhaps I did. You took me by surprise. I can see Lord Camber for a minute or two, if you particularly wish it, but——"

"Well?"

"The suggestion ought to come from Lady Camber."

As she spoke a tinge of colour flowed into her cheek, not unobserved by Napier. For the second time he was conscious of fog between Esther and himself.

"If you happen to be out when Lord Camber calls, and if he should ask for me—why, then——"

"I see. Women, I suppose, like to spin webs."

He spoke scornfully, and she felt an absurd desire to justify herself; to make him, the clever man, the specialist, realise his ignorance in regard to certain phases of the feminine mind.

"Mr. Napier, can you tell me in one word what has brought poor Lady Camber so very low?"

"One word? Um! No—it would take a dozen."

"The question can be answered with one word of three syllables."

"Impossible."

"Jealousy."

The word soaked in. Esther smiled. Instantly Napier was piqued into replying: "From my slight knowledge of Lord Camber, and from all I can learn, he has not given his wife cause for jealousy."

"Did I say that he had? Lord Camber is incapable of behaving with impropriety," she continued, sensible that her statement had been too authoritative, too obviously the judgment of a woman who must have known Camber intimately: "As you say, my patient has taken a fancy to me. She talks with embarrassing candour and without pretence. She astounded me by admitting that she was not a lady, and astounded me still more by adding that this was the tap-root of the trouble. Poor creature! She has been morbidly jealous of every lady she has met, of every woman better educated and better bred than herself."

"Go on," said Napier. "This is interesting and instructive." He spoke seriously, with his keen, penetrating eyes upon Esther's face. Her duty for the day was over, and the night-nurse had taken her place. At this hour of the evening Esther furnished a report and submitted a chart. Then she would change her gown and dine, and afterwards pay a visit to Miranda, or perhaps slip round to the nursing-home, hard by, where she was always sure of a welcome.

"She is easier in her mind now, because such comparisons are impossible. Lord Camber sends nosegays. She knows that he is thinking kindly of her."

"I beg your pardon," said Napier. "You were right and I was wrong. All the same, I cannot be pestered when I'm at work in the laboratory. You

wish the suggestion that you should answer Lord Camber's questions to come from his wife?"

"Ye-es."

"A hesitating affirmative. Well, leave it to me. Are you perfectly comfortable?"

"Perfectly, thank you."

"If you want anything, name it."

"Am I coming back into the laboratory when this is over?"

"Of course. I miss you very much. I won't instal anybody in your place."

"What a handsome compliment! But it reminds me that I ought to return this."

She was about to take a small key from a thin chain, the key of the laboratory to which no one was allowed access, when he held up his hand, smiling.

"Keep it as a pledge that I mean what I say. And look in to see how things are going whenever you have a mind."

"Thanks; I will."

She left the library and returned to her own room. But when she dined with the nurses in attendance upon other cases in the house her usual vivacity seemed to have deserted her. She found her mind dwelling upon Harry, who began to assume the proportions of an advancing Juggernaut. She was sure that he had plotted and planned to secure a meeting with her. Men spun webs, finely reticulated webs, in which women who wished to be left alone were cruelly enmeshed.

Esther, naturally enough, mentioned to Miranda that she was likely to meet the paladin.

"Ha, ha! My lord flirts with opportunity."

"Why do you assign the base motive?"

"I don't blame him a bit."

"I do, if—if what you think is true."

"How ungenerous!"

"Why should he not want to ask for little details about his wife?"

"He is a man, my dear, therefore he pursues the quarry which till now has escaped him."

"Then I'm in the most horribly embarrassing situation."

"You are. It's dramatic. I foresee comedy and, perhaps, tragedy."

"Miranda, you frighten me. I'm a coward. Mr. Napier and Mrs. Tower believe me to be brave and cool-witted. That's on the surface. I'm always acting on impulse and then regretting it."

"Regretting it? Oho!"

"I do not regret the impulse which drove me from Mont Plaisir."

"Never? Come, come, between old friends let the truth prevail!"

"Never—in my sane moments. But why did I not refuse Harry when he asked me to—well, dissemble? I was weak as water at a critical moment. And I ought to have held out valiantly against Mr. Napier's importunity. Vanity! I wanted to keep his good opinion."

"I believe you are falling in love with Mr. Napier."

"Miranda!"

"He must be a cold-blooded animal if he's not falling in love with you."

"Please!"

"I'm a coarse, common old woman, who cares little for anything or anybody, but who would like to see you in clover before she turns up her rheumatic toes."

What might be said or done after this? Could Esther soar into the empyrean, leaving so stout a friend fatly sitting on mother earth? And if she remained she must eat and drink Miranda's food, and listen to Miranda's talk: the fare provided for body and mind being of the rump-steak pudding sort, with bread and cheese and a glass of strong ale to follow! Also, if long in her company, Esther became conscious of a temptation (strenuously resisted) to sit at ease in dressing-gown and slippers.

Walking back to Harley Street, she asked herself very soberly: Was Napier's interest in her likely to warm into a more ardent attachment? When his work was done, did he think of her, as she had begun to think of him?

For, at last, he had taken hold of her imagination, although her fancy, in the sentimental sense, still remained merely lukewarm. He began to appear as a possible paladin: a paladin disguised and afoot, a very different figure from our magnificent Harry, armed *cap-à-pie* in shining armour, superbly mounted, and challenging the world. Napier must have had a tincture of humble Allen's blood in his veins. He was chivalrous when nobody was looking, although in this densely populated island it may be taken for granted that sharp eyes lurk behind every fence. Esther had heard of some of Napier's feats. Mrs. Tower, who

never exaggerated, who would have recited the tale of Marathon or Trafalgar without a tremor in her voice, had spoken to Esther of fights fought to a finish in London slums. Napier's spacious house was sanctuary for poor and rich. Above the rooms occupied by Lady Camber an overworked sempstress was undergoing similar treatment.

From thoughts of Napier, Esther turned with reluctance to speculate concerning Harry. Alice had given her to understand that my lord had been a faithful husband. She boasted of it shrilly, comparing him with other men of his world whose illustrious names fell trippingly from her tongue. But devotion and fidelity are not synonyms for passionate love. Was Harry capable of passionate love? That would have saved poor Alice. Beneath its ardent beams she would have grown plump.

Harry, Esther reflected, and quailed at the thought, might have remained faithful to his first love! He had treated a doctor's assistant with indifference. Had he met her upon the old footing, had he betrayed by a quiver of the lip, by one faltering phrase, that she was still dear to him, she could never have consented to nurse his wife.

CHAPTER XIX

ALICE ADORNS HERSELF FOR THE PALADIN

Upon the following morning she saw Harry. Esther was sitting beside Alice when the discreet Buckle delivered the message. Mr. Napier was engaged. Could Nurse Yorke see his lordship for two minutes? Nurse Yorke replied gravely that she also was engaged. Finally, Alice—as had been foreseen—insisted upon Esther's descending to the library, where Harry, more monumental than ever, awaited her. He held a bunch of lilies in his hand.

In answer to his first questions Esther yielded to the temptation of speaking with greater optimism than was warrantable. Harry listened with dignified composure.

"She is responding," he said, solemnly.

"Yes, that is quite the right word."

"Please give her these lilies with my love."

"Certainly. Your nosegays are a vital part of the cure."

She was leaving the room, when he called her by name.

"Esther——"

"Wouldn't it be safer to say—Nurse?"

"We are friends, eh?"

She was furious with herself for blushing. His gaze

disconcerted her. And she saw that her blush pleased him.

"I don't think we can be friends, Lord Camber."

"Why not?"

"I haven't time to answer such a question. Good-bye!"

"*À demain*," he replied.

She flitted from the room, angry with him and angry with herself. Alice asked innumerable questions. Did his lordship look well? What was the colour of his necktie? Did he seem very anxious? Was he playing golf to distract him? Had he said anything about returning to Camber for the hunting? Esther answered these questions so satisfactorily that Alice exclaimed: "You must see him every day that he is here."

"Mr. Napier may disapprove."

"I shall make a special favour of it. I feel as if I'd just swallowed half a bottle of fizz. Regular tonic, you are!"

Harry saw Esther upon several successive days, and, insensibly, they began to drift into something approximating to the old pleasant intercourse. The paladin behaved remarkably well, considering all things, and kept himself in hand. Alice, had she been present at these brief interviews, would have been satisfied with his exemplary behaviour. To do and say the right thing had become such a habit with our Harry, that it was difficult for him to break loose from it. Nevertheless Esther had an ever-increasing terror that he

still loved her, and she could not help admiring his self-control and perfect manners. Daily, also, she considered the propriety, the necessity, of acquainting both Napier and Alice with the facts. She urged this upon Harry, but his obstinacy was great. He had changed his position for another more impregnable. Candidly he admitted that at the first shock of encounter he had exacted a pledge of silence from his beneficiary upon the ground that he did not wish to be exposed as an ass. But his second reason had been the better. Upon Alice's account silence must be maintained inviolate.

"You have placed me in a false position."

"And you——? Did you not do just that to me?"

"Not willingly."

He replied with warmth.

"I loathe deceit. But we mustn't think of ourselves. I promised Napier to co-operate cordially with him. Everything that is possible must be done for my poor wife."

Everything possible was done and the patient responded.

At the end of a fortnight Harry returned to Camber for the opening meet of the Quorn. He left instructions at his florists' that flowers were to be delivered in Harley Street every morning at ten, and, taking leave of Esther, he sent some charming messages to his wife. The smile with which Esther speeded his departure may have been slightly beaming, but it vanished when he announced his intention of writing to her.

"Is that necessary?"

"My poor wife cannot write or receive letters. I'm entirely dependent upon your kindness and good nature."

"You needn't write. I'll send postcards."

"I shall answer them."

With that he went his way, head in air and chest finely inflated. Assuredly he had a liberal faculty for dealing with difficulties and perplexities which keep anxious women awake at night. One felt convinced that his conscience was as clear as his skin. Esther told Miranda with undisguised glee that he had departed.

"Has he made love to you?"

"How dare you ask such a question?"

"He let you see that you are still the one and only?"

"The one and only is—himself."

But as she affirmed this, with a determined nod of the head, she knew that she was not quite fair to him.

"How ungenerous of you to say that!"

"You drive me into corners."

"Obviously your machine of a doctor has cut him out."

"If you talk like that I shall run away."

"Is the wife really better?"

"By pounds and pounds and pounds!"

"Um! Sabrina dies and she lives, and you believe in an Allwise Personal Providence!"

"I believe in a personal devil, when you are in this vein."

Miranda only chuckled.

Harry wrote letters. He had enjoyed a capital gallop on Thursday, but his second horseman had not turned up in time, so he had missed an even better hunt in the afternoon! The hedges were awfully blind. His neighbours were very sympathetic and hospitable. He had laid down a pipe of Dow's port. It was an experiment, because his uncle, not a bad judge, had always sworn by Cockburn. He was thinking of rebuilding the stables at Camber. . . . Esther remembered that in the old days he had always talked in this strain, taking for granted that the subjects near to his heart must be of absorbing interest to others. She replied with postcards, writing them in Alice's room, beside Alice's bed. A fair sample of these wares is submitted.

"Steady improvement. A gain of half a pound yesterday. Patient sends love."

At the bottom of each card Alice insisted upon executing a cross in pencil. All the Snellings did this with or without provocation. Esther watched her with a drawn feeling at the heart, for she was desperately sorry for her patient, in spite of many peevish moods, alternating with a gushing familiarity and affection perhaps harder to bear.

Meanwhile her relations with Napier were monopolising what attention she could spare from her patient. At the end of a month Napier became triumphant. A miracle had been wrought. As in the duchess's case, he awarded the credit to Esther. "You are a witch," he said, again and again. He did what she had never

known him to do with other nurses, he discussed the case exhaustively. And he spoke of other cases. She perceived that his whole soul went out, upon the wings of an immense pity, to relieve distress. His pale, thin face glowed with feeling when he spoke of starved bodies and brains of children without food or toys or love, of women beaten by drunken husbands, of girls driven onto the streets: all of them bred in the slums, condemned to live and die in the slums, and to bring forth myriads as wretched and forlorn as themselves. And he railed against the indifference of the more fortunate, intent only upon comfort, furious if their peace of mind were disturbed; blind and deaf to what groaned and travailed within a few hundred yards of their cosy hearths and well-spread tables.

"It's something to be proud of, isn't it?" he demanded. "We think ourselves—and we are—the greatest race on earth, and in London alone a quarter of a million children have not enough to eat! Glorious —eh?"

By the look on her face, by her wet eyes, by her quivering lips, he knew that she knew, that she, also, had been down to the depths, and that, like a soldier who had survived a stricken field, she could not bear to speak of what she had seen and endured.

"And the worst of it is," he concluded, "they have not the spirit to fight against the appalling conditions under which they exist."

Nevertheless he was no pessimist, although scornful of those contending that all was for the best in the best of worlds. Success, she could see (as in the case

of Lady Camber and the little sempstress), intoxicated him. When he appeared sad and absent-minded, with a look in his eyes as if he had lost something, Esther divined that his skill had been of no avail, that some life for which he had fought was guttering out, leaving him in temporary darkness.

At the end of five weeks he yielded to his patient's solicitation to see husband and maid. The change wrought in Alice's outward appearance was really remarkable; her pink and white prettiness had come back, her eyes sparkled; the scales recorded even a greater increase of weight than that achieved by her Grace. She took delight in choosing the most ethereal *peignoir*, a pale blue and white affair, very virginal, in which —so Esther assured her—she looked not a day older than eighteen. She sent for the trinkets which Harry had given to her before marriage; in a word, she dressed the part, so as to appear what she had been when the paladin laid all he possessed at her feet. Esther assisted with enthusiasm. She also apprehended the importance of a *coup de théâtre*. So much depended upon this first meeting. But Esther's enthusiasm was make-believe, part and parcel of the comedy carefully rehearsed. Inwardly, she was conscious of acute depression. She could not have explained this. Perhaps instinct told her that these elaborate preparations were all in vain; that the paladin, as before, would not justify expectation, would not—as Miranda might say—play up!

Upon the eve of Harry's arrival, just after the full-dress rehearsal, when Alice, arrayed in the wonderful

peignoir had chosen her exact position in the sitting-room adjoining her bedroom, Napier said to Esther:

"I can't disguise from you that the heart worries me even more than I care to admit. We shall have to be very careful, because I dare not tell her the truth. Now that she is out of bed she will insist upon doing too much. Your hard times are ahead."

"I know that."

"She thinks herself cured, and I wish her to think it, provided she does not presume upon it. However, she won't be allowed on her feet unless you are present. Watch her. That is the last word."

Upon the morrow everybody in the house knew that Lord Camber was coming at eleven to see his wife. Something of the excitement attending a marriage was in the air. Many flowers arrived, arranged by Esther in the sitting-room, a charming apartment, gay with the freshest chintz, and distinguished by decorations of Adam. A large three-sided cheval glass was brought from Grosvenor Square. After being arrayed in the *peignoir* by Esther, Alice was allowed to survey her own captivating image. She laughed and clapped her hands.

"What will Harry say?"

That was the rub. What would he say, this master of the right word, this precision in propriety? Esther felt almost impelled to waylay him in the passage, and to whisper, "Kiss her as you kissed her when she promised to become your wife. Tell her again and again and again that she is prettier than ever. Praise her gown, her shoes, her silk stockings. Notice the

little diamond heart which will lie above her own. When you sit by her hold her hand in yours! And smile, smile, smile, from the moment you enter the room till you leave it."

Could she have said that, had he acted upon such sound advice, how much misery might have been avoided!

The three-sided mirror reflected Esther also. The demure nurse, in uniform, wearing white cuffs and cap, served as an excellent foil to her sparkling patient.

"Stand by me," said Alice.

For the first time they stood shoulder to shoulder, staring into the depths of the glass, both smiling. Then Alice, with a little hysterical cry, flung her arms about Esther's neck and kissed her.

"I love you, I love you," she whispered, "because I believe you have given me back my husband."

"Say that to Mr. Napier."

"I could hug him, too. But you, dear, have done the trick."

Esther led her gently to the sofa in the next room.

"Lie down and keep perfectly quiet!"

"I could dance."

"You will—if you are patient—later on."

"What time is it now?"

"Twenty-five minutes to eleven."

"Will they ever pass?"

Then as Esther adjusted a cushion Alice added:

"I shall tell Camber that he must settle something handsome on you for life."

Esther winced.

"You mustn't think that money is everything to me, or to Mr. Napier. We have earned our fees, perhaps——"

"I should think so, and jolly glad you must be to get 'em. When I was at the halls I stuck out for every penny I could come by. And, of course, Mr. Napier does the same."

"Not always," said Esther. "The patient who had the rooms above you left yesterday. She had the same care and attention that you have had. As you know, she worked for one of the big dressmakers at a sweating wage. For three days before she left her nurse noticed a slight reaction; she seemed to be distressed about something. Mr. Napier asked her what she had on her mind. Finally, she confessed that the thought of his bill was worrying her. He told her not to worry, but she did. Then she sent for him, and asked point blank what his charge was going to be. The nurse told me his answer."

"He said 'Nothing,' I suppose."

"He put it more delicately than that. He said, in his rather solemn way,' 'Do you know, I have searched all through my books, and I can't find your name anywhere.' With that he hurried away, and the nurse had to explain exactly what he meant."

"He's a good sort, although he is so plain. What time is it now?"

"Twenty minutes more! A watched pot never boils, although——"

"Well?"

"I was going to add, a watched husband does."

"Do you think I watch Lord Camber?"

The quick personal application answered the question.

"Lord Camber doesn't need watching."

"How do you know?"

Her lovely eyes filled with tears. Esther, pretending not to see them, moved to the windows and adjusted the blinds.

"Leave the blinds up," said Alice sharply. "I'm not afraid of the light now. I want him to see my skin, to stare at it. He knows that I'm quite capable of touching myself up."

Esther came back smiling.

"Do you think he'll be punctual?"

"Of course!"

"There's no 'of course' about it. She laughed excitedly and Esther held up a warning finger. "Oh! it's no use your doing that. If he isn't on time to the minute I shall jolly well know that he doesn't really care as I care. There—it's out! I can't bottle things up with you."

"He will be here to the minute."

But in her heart of hearts Esther was not quite sure of this. She remembered when she had waited for him. He had come, but not to the minute. And now every minute would count enormously, disastrously, to this expectant, excited, half-hysterical creature. She began to distract her patient with such small talk as she could wring out of a brain already overworked. Alice lay still, obviously not listening to a single word, every fibre of her body strung to the highest tension.

Eleven struck.

"Look out of the window," said Alice. "He will come in an electric brougham."

But no electric brougham was to be seen in the long, rather dismal street. Esther, feeling like Sister Anne, returned to the sofa to find her patient trembling. She placed her cool fingers upon the hot forehead.

"Many things may delay Lord Camber," she said quietly. "You must pull yourself together; let him find you at your very best."

"Do you think that I'd have been late if he was lying here?"

She spoke passionately, with a vehemence and intensity that proclaimed her fierce hunger for love, and her terror that she might remain hungry and, ultimately, starve because a stone was offered to her in lieu of bread.

"Shush-h-h! Perhaps the motor may have broken down."

"Not it! And we shall be able to pick holes in any excuse he'll have. You'll see."

"A block in Oxford Street, a clock too slow——"

Alice interrupted shrilly:

"He is late because he doesn't care."

"You have no right to say that."

Nevertheless, at this moment, perhaps for the first time in her life Esther hated Harry. It was ridiculous to condemn him unseen and unheard, and yet—and yet—he ought to have been punctual even if the heavens were falling. As the minutes crawled by, her pity and sympathy for Alice deepened. Words

she felt to be worse than useless. In silence both women waited and waited.

At half-past eleven poor Alice burst into hysterical laughter and tears.

Five minutes later, erect, smiling, with flowers in his hand, and a flower in his coat, our paladin marched majestically into the room.

CHAPTER XX

ESTHER'S VISION IS BLURRED

"I AM late," he said easily. "I was unavoidably detained."

He greeted Esther with a courteous bow, bending down to kiss his wife, who lay passive. Then he stepped back a pace to examine her.

"Marvellous!" he exclaimed. "A miracle!"

It was doubtful whether he saw any sign of the agitation which had torn her to pieces but a minute since. Certainly in less than that same minute Alice had demonstrated to Esther her resource as an actress. She said in a languid voice, hardly recognisable:

"What detained you, Harry?"

He had not a glimmering of the truth, not a grain of understanding wherewith to perceive that a great issue was at stake. But Esther felt instinctively that he was being tried for her patient's life. She could have struck him, when he answered in a complacent drawl:

"The Duke of Helmsdale called upon some important business."

"What?" The monosyllable was icy, but Harry never noticed that. He began his rigmarole of an explanation. And with every word he uttered he was thinking to himself that the duke had been extraordinarily civil and obliging. This august person was

his landlord in Sutherland from whom he leased a forest and a salmon river. The fishing tenants, working together for almost the first time in the history of Scotland, had entreated the duke to remove all nets and machines from the mouth of the river, in the hope of improving the angling. The duke had been kind enough to call upon our paladin, whom he recognised as the most important of these tenants. The vexed question, really one of ways and means, had been thoroughly thrashed out between them. It was entirely a matter of L.S.D. The duke would do his part, but the tenants would have to dive deep into their pockets. In conclusion, the great man had very justly observed: "If you want your fun you must pay for it." Extremely sound, that! For Harry's part he was willing to pay his shot. He always had been willing.

"Is that all?"

"We had a word or two about the stags. Helmsdale is going in for winter feeding on rather a large scale. There, again, if you want heads you must fork out. The duke and I were of one mind on that."

Alice glanced at Esther, who committed the unpardonable sin of nurseship. By all the unwritten laws of her profession, she should have dissembled. But she couldn't. Between the two women passed a long, silent look of perfect understanding.

Each realised the hopelessness of reproach, or of speech at all. The duke's errand had been of supreme importance; nothing, except possibly a raging toothache, could have induced our paladin to shorten the august visit.

"Of course, I couldn't get rid of him. I knew I should be late, but I said to myself you were too sensible to worry. As I was starting, the parson of St. Ethelred's came bothering round about some foolery connected with the unemployed. I bundled *him* out of the house pretty quick. Then I jumped into the motor—and here I am. Now, my dearest, tell us about yourself. You look perfectly charming, fresh as paint!"

"It isn't paint," said Alice.

Esther went into the bedroom, softly closing the door. As she passed Harry, she said: "Don't let her get up, Lord Camber!"

"Oh! you can trust me to look after her."

An uninitiated observer, hearing and beholding him, noting the pleasant, genial inflection of his voice, and the pleasant smile upon his comely face, would have said, "What a good fellow! What a capital chap!"

As Esther went out of the room, she thought to herself: "And I might have married him!"

When, a quarter of an hour later, she came back into the sitting-room, her compassion for her patient had swelled to preposterous proportions. And, already, she seemed to perceive a change. Alice's renovation had been an amazing bit of work; but Esther no longer regarded it with satisfaction. Indeed, she looked at Alice as she was in the habit of looking at some gown when it returned from the dyer's. The gown appeared to be as good as new, but it wasn't. The first shower would play the deuce with it. Alice

was not nearly as good as new, and the first shower had done perceptible mischief.

"Time's up," said Esther, trying to speak cheerily. Napier had insisted that this first visit should not exceed fifteen minutes' duration.

Harry took leave of his wife tenderly, but he did not dispute the doctor's fiat. Nor did he plead for just five minutes more. In the passage, alone with Esther, he expressed his gratitude to her handsomely, but his face had lost its expression of smug complacency, when he whispered:

"She will become as strong as ever, eh?"

"Mr. Napier will tell you it's too early to affirm that."

"I'm going to see Napier now. She looks wonderful!"

"I wish you could have seen her half an hour before you came."

"Oh!"

She repressed a smile with difficulty when she saw how sensitive he was about anything that concerned himself. In her tone he had caught a sublimated note of censure. He continued: "Surely, I made it plain that I was unavoidably detained—didn't I?"

"Unavoidably?"

"Helmsdale was extraordinarily civil and obliging. One can't kick out a duke like——"

"Like a bothering parson fussing about the unemployed? Certainly not!"

"You are as fond as ever of your joke, Esther."

"Nurse, *please!* I have nothing left but my sense of humour."

"By Jove, you look wonderfully handsome in a nurse's kit. Well, Peach will turn up this afternoon, and I'll drop in to-morrow at the same time."

Esther went back into the sitting-room to meet Alice's enormous eyes fixed upon her in piteous interrogation. She crossed to the sofa, knelt down, took her patient's hands, and said softly:

"Don't speak! Let me tell you what is in my mind."

She paused to pray for the right words. Esther had never lost faith in prayer; she believed that when her prayers were not answered, the fault lay with her: she had not prayed fervently enough.

Stroking Alice's pretty hands, she began in a beguiling voice: "I have seen women beaten by their husbands, kicked brutally, maltreated in every possible way; and these same women have never known what it is to lie in a decent bed, to eat decent food, or to wear decent clothes. There are thousands of them here in London. You have so much, Lady Camber, don't let the one little thing that is missing poison your life and his."

"You call it a little thing."

"Nearly all men are engrossed in what interests them, and nearly all men are slaves to convention."

"He never gave me half a chance," Alice continued vehemently. "If he'd allowed me to be myself I might have gone down with the best of 'em. Society wants

to be amused. If it's amused, it doesn't care a hang whether you are born in a cottage or a castle. It hates dull women, and quite right, too. I was dull to please him. I tried hard to behave myself on his account. I knew I was making a mess of it. I've been a damned fool. If I'd gone on my own, if I'd danced and mimicked off the stage as I used to do on, I should have had a success. And what drives me perfectly wild is the thought that in the end he'd have been jolly well pleased. And then, you know, he packed my people off to America. I thought it was so noble and generous of him, but, of course, he was ashamed of 'em. I missed mother and the kids most awfully. He said that Lady Matilda would be a mother to me. Funny, that, eh? My mother's worth two of her. He hasn't a notion that I'm a sort of hateful freak to his little Mumsie, and always will be."

"You've shed a good many tears in the last four years?"

"Bucketsful."

"Try smiles for a change, and be what you used to be, gay and amusing—natural, in a word."

Alice pondered this for a moment. Then she said slowly: "It's worth trying; but you see I know now that he doesn't really love me; and I suspect he never loved me. I—I flattered him into marrying me. I laid it on pretty thick, and he wallowed in it. Don't you think for a minute that I'd have married him if I hadn't believed at the time that he cared for me; but he didn't—he didn't. He never cared for anybody except himself."

During the afternoon, the faithful Peach duly appeared. Since her translation from dresser to maid, she had assumed a gentility which sat comically upon her hard, whimsical face. In moments of excitement, she relapsed into cockneyisms and the free speech of the theatres and halls. From the first moment of meeting, her manner with Esther was that of the jealous, hypercritical servant whose nose is badly out of joint. Esther saw that she was devoted to her mistress.

Alice, unfortunately, being tired out, received her old watchdog without effusion, and became peevish when the affectionate animal began, so to speak, to paw her and lick her face.

"That'll do, you stupid old thing! Don't fuss!"

Esther perceived that Harry's indifference was likely to be paid back, *plus* interest, to Peach, who was positively overwhelmed by the change in her mistress.

"Never saw you look better," she declared, "never! What you want now is a little cheerful serciety." She glanced at Esther, and tossed her head.

Whereupon Alice said tartly: "Hold your tongue! You speak much too loudly. Try to speak softly, as Nurse Yorke speaks!"

"Very good, my lady, but I was never one to mince *my* words!"

At seven that evening, Esther reported as usual, but some things were left unsaid. Napier's expression puzzled her.

"Anything troubling you?" she asked.

He pushed back his chair, with a familiar gesture, indicating a desire to speak frankly.

"Lord Camber troubles me."

"Yes?"

"I hardly like to tell you my impressions; I'm ashamed of them, and yet——"

He broke off, staring at her, nervous and excited. Then he began again, half-deprecatingly: "Perhaps I'm becoming too analytical. I search and search, and sometimes I find what isn't really there. Once, at the beginning of my career, I blundered horribly. I break into a cold sweat when I think of it. All went well, fortunately, and I learned a lesson. My patient became a healthy, useful woman. Her nerves were wrong, nothing else. Since, I've been rather a Thomas. I distrust my own ears and eyes."

Again he paused, but Esther knew that he would speak fully, and the fact that she had won his confidence filled her with pride and joy.

"Lord Camber, I repeat, troubles me. He came in, stood where you're standing, and said some pleasant things. He has charming manners, but in my opinion manners don't make the man, although they often serve to disguise the monkey. Be patient. Don't you see how I funk coming to the point? Sit down, please."

He waited till Esther was seated, then he said abruptly:

"Camber didn't want his wife to get well."

"Oh!"

"You look at me with horror. Perhaps I am wrong: I hope sincerely I am wrong."

"What makes you think this—this terrible thing?"

"You said just now that the maid was quite overcome. It's not surprising. Apparently, Lady Camber is the very picture of health. A layman would insure her life at a minimum rate without asking for an examination. I expected from the husband an extravagant expression of delight and surprise."

"Surely you got it?"

"Of course I got it. He couldn't say enough, or, rather, he said too much. I found myself floundering in a sea of compliments. And then——"

"Yes?"

"I was sitting here; he was sitting where you are. His face was turned towards me, as yours is. I kept on saying to myself: 'My boy, this is better than any cheque. Lie down and roll in this good fellow's gratitude and joy; this is the moment which makes everything worth while.' And all the time I'd a dismal feeling that I wasn't rolling in it. His gratitude gave me no pleasure whatever."

"How extraordinary!"

"Wait. He stood up to take leave. Stand up, please." Esther obeyed. "We shook hands like this." Esther's hand was fervently grasped and relinquished. "Now walk to the door."

To do this, she had to turn her back upon him. As she did so she allowed her face to change, to become natural, reflecting her dismay that Napier should have discovered and put into words a conviction already overshadowing her.

"Stop!"

She stopped, frightened by a thrill in his voice.

When she faced him, she saw that something unexpected had happened.

"You, too," he murmured. He pointed to the looking-glass above the chimney-piece.

"I saw his face in that," he explained. "Just as I saw yours just now. And the expression on both was curiously alike. You looked miserable—and so did he."

"You made me feel miserable."

"Yes, yes; the expression is natural enough on your face, I suppose, but why should *he* look miserable?"

"I—I don't know."

"He should have been gloating."

Esther said nothing.

"I can't get his face out of my mind. It was more than miserable; it was hopeless, and my last words had been: 'With care, Lady Camber may outlive you.'"

"You have an object in telling me this."

"Yes. Lord Camber is a stranger to me, but not to you. Is there anything in your previous knowledge of him which would explain that terrible expression? Mind you, I saw it—saw it when he believed that no one could see."

The kindly, penetrating eyes which missed so little were upon hers. She desired passionately to fling pledges to the winds—and couldn't.

She would ask Harry, on her knees, if necessary, to cut these galling knots, and then, with his permission, Napier should have an answer to his question.

Meanwhile she must temporise.

"I only knew Lord Camber before his marriage,"

she replied slowly. "I never met his wife till five weeks ago."

"When you knew him, did you class him among the sheep or the goats?"

"The sheep."

"Can you remember what the world said of him behind his back?"

"Nothing but good. He was a famous cricketer, a bold rider, and a good shot."

"Any thruster in the pursuit of pleasure may be all that."

"And a devoted son."

"That's better. Well, I see you can't help me."

"I would if I could. You believe that?"

"Yes."

"He may have some other trouble——?"

She spoke tentatively. Napier nodded his head, muttering, "Likely enough. Anyway, I suspend judgment. I shall keep an open mind and an open eye."

Esther went upstairs to her room. And then, the need of confiding in a friend overmastering her, she paid a visit to Miranda, the pagan, and apostle of expediency, who, because her own life had been cruelly hard, was almost indiscreetly anxious that other lives should be easy, particularly Esther's.

"Well, my dear," said Miranda, with a sharp glance at Esther's too white face and set lips, "you look excited and spent. How goes the play? Will it end happily?"

"I don't know. At any rate, please call it anything but a play."

She spoke with slight irritation, for Miranda's passion for histrionics affected her nerves.

"Shall I call it comedy—or tragedy? And how is the leading man?"

"Bother the leading man."

"By all means. That is absolutely necessary. Bother him as much as possible, to test his quality."

"Oh, Miranda, I quake; I'm beginning to think that he hasn't got any. And I'm so sorry for his poor wife."

She recited the incidents of the day, while Miranda, with impenetrable countenance, smoked three cigarettes. We may infer that Esther went into details.

"And now, what's to be done?" Esther concluded. "My vision is blurred. I think one thing one minute, and just the opposite the next. If one could only walk into Gamage's and buy immunity from thought."

"Some women buy it at a chemist's or at a public house. But, thank Heaven, you're not that sort."

"I've come here to-night to tell you I'm going to ask Harry to release me from that pledge."

"He won't," said the wise Miranda. "Few men would, and he's not one of them. When you bolted he must have felt terribly cheap, but he consoled himself with the knowledge that the world would not get hold of the story. Mind you, if he loved his wife, he would probably tell her himself, and have a laugh over it. But he doesn't love his wife, you say now, never did, on her own testimony, and I'll bet a new pair of slippers he still loves you."

"I don't know that," said Esther obstinately.

"But I do," replied her friend, with even greater obstinacy. "And my head is clearer than yours because I'm not bothered with a conscience."

"If I break my promise——?"

"Oh, ho! You've got as far as that, have you? Well, it shows you're precious anxious to please one man at the expense of another to whom you owe an enormous debt. But you run risks. I'd not say much about that month in France, if I were you. It's trying the other fellow rather high."

"Miranda, you put things in such an odious way."

"My dear, I say what most women think; and I've had to pay for it. I told my sister Laura the plain truth, twice. She profited by it, but she's not spoken to me since."

"If you speak the plain truth, why shouldn't I?"

"As to that, it all depends upon what you will gain."

"I swear my gain doesn't count with me."

"You interrupted me. If you won't consider your own gain, you can't ignore another's loss. If this woman's heart is dicky, the truth might kill her. Are you prepared to face a funeral of your own making?"

"No—no."

"Personally, I'm rather a stickler for the truth, but when I have to tell a lie, I tell a good one, and stick to it through thick and thin."

"I've not told any lie."

"You've acted one, willy-nilly. In your place I'd have done the same; and the reasons which made you hold your tongue when you engaged to nurse Lady

Camber are stronger than ever to-day. I always said you were too sentimental. This poor creature has stirred you to the core; she likes you, naturally enough; but, mark me! she'll hate you like poison when she finds out that her husband asked you five times to marry him. If you want to polish her off in a nice, genteel, Christian way, tell her the whole truth; if you want to polish yourself off in Napier's estimation, tell him the whole truth."

Esther was silent. Then some expression upon her face, the radiance of heart which for many days she had hidden there, beamed in her eyes. Miranda stared at her.

"Heavens! You are in love with your doctor!"

Esther laid burning cheeks upon Miranda's bosom.

"Tell me," said Miranda, very gently. Then, as Esther remained silent, she whispered persuasively: "Dear little Esther, has the real thing come to you?"

"Yes," replied Esther, adding swiftly: "It is the real thing."

"And he cares for you?"

"I don't know. I—I think so. He has always been so kind, so considerate. How can I help loving him? Miranda, he's a true paladin. And now, to deceive him, to run the awful risk of losing his love when I feel in my heart that it is mine——! Oh, Miranda, please advise me!"

Miranda kissed her, smoothing her cheeks with the small hand which was still soft and pretty. Would any man accept Esther's story with the full realisation of the complex motives which had inspired actions so

indiscreet? She frowned; for her faith in man had been badly strained. Still smoothing Esther's cheek, she said slowly:

"He must be a machine if he doesn't love you. And yet, to speak now, to tell him everything——! Well, I simply can't advise that. At any rate try the other fellow first. He's not a bad sort, and generous. Can't you speak to him alone for five minutes?"

"If I could!"

The two women considered the difficulties. Now that Harry was admitted to Alice's room, the meetings in the library had come to an end. The duel—for duel it might be—must be fought to a finish outside the house, in a quiet spot secure from interruption.

Esther walked back to Harley Street with a smile upon her face, and the glad light still in her eyes.

CHAPTER XXI

RAIN IN CAVENDISH SQUARE

Upon the following morning, our paladin arrived, as might be expected, punctual to the minute. With him came the great Sir Bedford Slufter, generously disposed to acclaim a triumph and to spread the news of it far and wide. After a short but satisfactory consultation in the patient's bedroom, we behold the eminent physician (as before) leading his dear lady to a sofa, and installing her upon it with a ceremony and courtliness which had endeared him to the highest personages in the realm. Napier and Harry followed; Esther carried a bundle of charts at which Sir Bedford had just glanced. Peach, unwilling to appear an outsider, clasped to her lean bosom a large pale blue silk cushion.

"Slip it behind my back, Peach. Not there, you clumsy creature! Thank you, nurse; what a clever darling you are! Sir Bedford, can't you coax Mr. Napier to let me have a pint of fizz for lunch?"

Sir Bedford, standing as if before a shrine, murmured: "A pint? I dare not ask for that, but one glass of sound, natural wine, eh, my dear Napier?"

Napier nodded.

"One small glass. Remember, nurse!"

"One small glass," repeated Esther. "I once told

a patient she might have one glass of port and she drank a large tumblerful."

"One can't be too explicit," added Sir Bedford. "I allowed my poor old friend, the Bishop of—well, well, we won't mention names—I told him to eat meat once a day. He consumed three chump chops at a sitting."

"I feel as if I could," said Alice.

"They accelerated the crisis," concluded Sir Bedford in a sepulchral tone. Then, feeling that the conversation was becoming too melancholy for such an auspicious occasion, he raised his hand, and exclaimed gallantly: "Looking at you, dear lady, I can say with Tom Moore, 'I breathe the fresh air of life's morning once more.'"

Alice raised her delicate eyebrows.

"Tom never said that," she answered.

"I give you my word he did."

"Not he! I knew him well: Lord Ballygowan's son, who was in the Pink Hussars, a very naughty boy!"

Sir Bedford smiled blandly. His voice was sugary, as he murmured, "I quoted Thomas Moore, the poet."

"Never heard of him," said Alice, with the famous combination of smile and wink which used to convulse the gallery. Then, with a lightning change of manner, she asked demurely: "Do I look myself again?"

Sir Bedford delivered a solemn verdict.

"You look eighteen, not a day more."

"Nice man! Did you see me when I was eighteen, and played in *The Belle and the Tiger* at the Jollity? Rare fun, too!" She sighed.

Sir Bedford, conscious that our paladin was disapproving these reminiscences, said lightly, "You were the Belle, of course?"

Peach, hovering in the background, replied, "My lady was the tiger, smartest you ever saw. Such breeches and boots! My!"

Sir Bedford hid a scandalised face behind a plump white hand; Napier smiled, much amused; our paladin scowled. Alice, glancing from man to man, said tartly: "Peach, you're a fool! You never miss an opportunity of saying and doing the wrong thing. Now—hook it!"

"Beg pardon, my lady."

With a glare at Esther, who stood near the door, the old dresser went back to the bedroom. Sir Bedford, ever tactful, perceived that the moment was ripe for one of his anecdotes.

"Before I go," he began, in his fruitiest voice, "I must tell you a capital story against myself."

"You tell stories against yourself? Downy that," murmured Alice.

Sir Bedford, with a gesture which included everybody, continued: "I had an interesting case of suspended animation the other day. A child, a fine little fellow, was lying apparently dead in one of the wards of my pet hospital, the Children's Hospital; I arrived at the poignant moment when the house-surgeon, a kindly man, was breaking the news to the unfortunate mother. The poor creature could hardly believe that her son, an only son, was—in fact—dead! The house-surgeon appealed to me. I said, taking her hand, 'My

good woman, the dear child has gone to a Better Land than this.'"

"How did you know that?" said Alice.

Sir Bedford ignored the interruption, continuing suavely: "Judge of my surprise, my dear Napier, and confusion, when the little fellow opened his eyes and observed in an unmistakably cockney accent, 'No, I ain't!'"

Alice began to laugh immoderately.

"And then," concluded Sir Bedford, approaching his climax with admirable art, "the mother, who would seem to be lacking in a sense of humour, said to the child, 'Don't you contradict the doctor, Albert, he knows better than you or me.'"

Amid a chorus of laughter Sir Bedford took his leave, promising to call again and tell another anecdote. Napier, seeing that his patient was already overexcited, made a sign to Esther, who followed him and Sir Bedford out of the room. Husband and wife were left alone together.

"Do I really look very, very nice?" murmured Alice.

"You look remarkably well," replied Harry stiffly. "By the way, surely you have heard of Thomas Moore, the poet?"

"Rather! But I wanted to pull Sir Bedford's leg."

"He will carry an absurd tale of your ignorance everywhere. He's on his way to the Palace now."

"I know he is." Suddenly she began to mimic the great man to the life. "'The dear Princess is able to take a little solid nourishment—tapioca. Very gratifying! *Ve*-ry!'"

But our paladin did not deign to smile. His wife seemed to have no sense whatever of her position. He remained blind to the fact that she was displaying wares which once had allured and amused him, making a desperate effort to please her lord, trying to be light and gay, as Esther had counselled, and to woo his favour with quips. Insensible to her wiles, he was thinking: "Oh, my God! After four years with me she doesn't know the common decencies of life. And I'm tied to this bundle of nerves and slang for ever and ever."

Did she read him? Perhaps. Her face clouded, the light went out of her eyes. Her voice became petulant and hard.

"You knew what I was when you married me. You didn't think you could make a prim, smirking society doll out of me, did you?"

"My dear girl, you mustn't excite yourself."

"I don't. You excite me. I'm not a bad sort, but I can't understudy your mother."

"Come, come, this is so bad for you."

"I know it. My heart is beating like blazes. I'm fire; and you're ice."

She burst into tears.

The paladin tried to staunch them with words which Dr. Watts might have approved. Failing utterly, he summoned Esther and Napier, who were speaking together in the passage. Harry, as a spectator, assumed an expression eminently appropriate. But a slight look of relief illumined his face when Napier said, peremptorily: "I prescribe absolute quiet. I

shall turn you out," he addressed Harry, who bowed, "and your patient must see nobody but you," he turned to Esther, who nodded. Then he added, "We are making haste too quickly."

Harry bent down to kiss his wife.

"Wait one minute," she murmured.

"Let it be no more than that!"

Napier went out of the room. Esther could see that he was frowning, and fidgeting with his fingers. Wishing to leave husband and wife together for the brief time accorded to them, she retreated to the bedroom, where she found Peach, open-eyed and open-mouthed.

"What's up!"

"Lady Camber has had a slight hysterical attack. Please go to your room. My patient must be kept perfectly quiet for the rest of the day."

"Doctor's orders, eh?"

The tone was designedly insolent, but Esther answered gently: "Yes."

"What my lady wants is someone who really loves 'er, and understands 'er."

With this Parthian shot, the faithful one whisked out of the room. Esther returned to her patient. Evidently, Harry had made his peace, for Alice was smiling, although her cheeks were still wet. Harry marched out, reinflated.

"Please run after him, nurse, and ask when he's coming again."

Esther overtook Harry as he reached the staircase. No one was in the hall below, or upon the stairs above. But, a few feet distant, a very heavy curtain shut off

the approach to the backstairs and the servants' rooms. Rushing swiftly after opportunity, it did not occur to Esther that anybody behind the curtain might overhear what was said in the corridor. And she had quite forgotten that an injured, vindictive old woman had just been summarily despatched.

Now, impulse—as we know—had sent Esther on the previous evening hot-foot to an old friend, whose common-sense might on occasion dilute difficulties but was not likely to wash away intuitions and instincts. The same ineradicable impulse sent her at a gallop after our paladin. Sabrina, under similar circumstances, would have stood still, not advancing an inch till she was sure of her ground. Esther knew afterwards that she had been spurred to a desperate charge by the prickings of subterfuge. She, like Miranda, felt capable of telling a big lie and sticking to it; fibs, moreover, particularly those elaborated in the interest of others, she regarded as venial, and, in the case of nurse and patient, often requisite and imperative. But the everlasting, tormenting, hairshirt itch of subterfuge drove her mad. Enforced practice of its shifts and evasions seemed to eat away that crust of self-possession and patience so highly esteemed by Mrs. Tower and Napier. In a word, she was goaded into doing something which indicated not lack of intelligence, but a disordered superfluity of it. If a woman of temperament desires inordinately to hit the right nail on the head, ten to one she misses it and hits her fingers instead. To use a golfing expression—she presses and foozles.

The judicious may grieve at Esther's precipitancy, but they will understand it.

"One moment!"

She spoke breathlessly.

"Yes?"

"Are you coming to-morrow?"

Peach, on her way to her room, heard the question. Very suspicious of young and good-looking women, ever ready to infer the worst upon the smallest provocation, she stood still, wondering why his lordship was addressed in so familiar a tone. With a cunning smile upon her withered face she crept back to the curtain.

"Of course."

Harry stood just below Esther, having descended two of the stairs, and hearing her voice, he turned, looking up at her, with the expression which poor Alice had never seen, and which Esther recognised immediately. Peach, peering behind the curtain, drew in her breath sharply.

Unstrung by this sudden resurrection of feelings which she had vainly hoped to be dead, Esther continued nervously, "I must see you alone. When and where can we meet quietly, for a few minutes?"

"Name your own time and place, my dear Esther. I shall be there."

"Please, please, don't call me Esther. It's so dangerous."

"I hate to even think of you as Nurse Yorke."

"Can you meet me to-night at seven, by the Bentinck statue in Cavendish Square?"

"With pleasure."

"Thanks."

He continued his stately progress down the stairs, smiling magnanimously; Esther hastened back to her patient; Peach, with a snarl of rage and indignation, repeated to herself: "Bentinck statoo! Cavendish Square! Seven to-night! The minx!"

Nurse Richards relieved Esther at six o'clock that evening. For a fortnight her duties had been extremely light. Her patient slept well, and exacted no attention whatever between the hours of ten and eight. Because of this Napier engaged a pleasant, capable person, but undistinguished by Esther's shining qualities and certainly not nearly so amusing a companion as Peach. When Esther went off duty, Alice asked if Peach might come to her for half an hour. Peach would brush her hair and put her to bed. After a moment's hesitation Esther referred the question to Napier through the telephone which communicated with the library. Napier acceding, Peach was sent for, but it appeared that she had just left the house. Nurse Richards brushed Alice's hair, as usual, and Esther, after changing her dress, hurried off to keep her appointment with the paladin.

By this time she was frightened. To add to her terrors the night was dark, and rain had begun to fall; a chill mist penetrated to the marrow. Instinct warned Esther that no good would come of this mad enterprise, and that evil encompassed her in this damp mirk. She felt like a fair-weather sailor putting to

sea with a falling glass and clouds rising black above the horizon.

As she walked swiftly to the trysting-place, the remembrance of Harry's expression flashed a warning signal. She understood perfectly that his seeming coldness had been simulated. He had wished to chastise her. Now, he was about to relax from austerity into—what? With what cooling words could she quench flames? However, flames could not burn very ardently upon such a sopping night as this.

Harry stood beneath the statue, almost as impressive a figure. Across the way, under a lamp, might be seen a woman in black, probably—as Esther thought—some poor waif of the streets, patiently awaiting the grim command to move on. It was Peach, unmindful of the cold, and muttering to herself, "The minx! the slut! How I'd like to scratch her eyes out!"

Harry grasped Esther's hand, and pressed it. She withdrew it, hastily. Then he said, in the old familiar tone with which he had imposed vanilla ice upon her when she preferred strawberry:

"It's a beastly night. We can't talk comfortably in this soaking rain. I have a cab here. In you get!"

"But where are we going? I can say what I have to say in five minutes."

"We can catch our death of cold in five minutes. Get in."

Masterfully, he took her arm, led her to the cab, almost pushed her into its fusty interior, and bade the cabman drive to Baker Street Metropolitan Station.

Esther asked him if he was quite mad; he replied

with deliberation: "We shall drive there and back. What you have to say may take only five minutes, I want half an hour."

The cab rumbled off. Under the lamp a woman in black said, beneath her breath: "There they go! Dinner for two in a private room at a quiet resterong! Pah! And to look at 'er, you'd suppose that butter wouldn't melt in 'er mouth!"

Inside the evil-smelling cab Esther was saying: "Please release me from that promise which you extorted in Mr. Napier's library. It has placed me in an abominably false position with my patient and my employer. Let me tell part of the truth to your wife, and all of it to Mr. Napier."

These "lines," it may be guessed, had been carefully rehearsed. Delivered in the right way, at the right time, they might have had an effect. But Miranda would have shuddered to see a former pupil so lost to the dramatic fitness of things as to attempt the subtle art of persuasion in a growler without previous "playing-up" to the climax, and upon an unlighted stage. Harry listened without interrupting. His old Chief had inculcated the wisdom of letting a woman speak first and finish. "Then you can make hay of her arguments at your leisure," counselled this diplomat. "If you speak first, she won't listen, because she's thinking of what is in her mind, not yours."

"Why do you ask this?"

"Because I am distracted. Miranda Jagg told me that I should never make an actress. It's true. You are forcing me to play a part I detest. And I'm doing

it badly. At any moment I may break down. I've an appalling attack of stage-fright."

"You ask this on your own account solely?"

"Ye—es."

"I can't see your face, but that 'Yes' sounded unconvincing."

"Harry, please put me out of my misery!"

Here she struck the right note; but it ought to have preceded the hesitating "yes."

The paladin was moved. Pain thrilled in Esther's voice, and pain, in any form, distressed him. To the parson of St. Ethelred's he gave cheques, but he refused to listen to horrors; and, like Lady Matilda, he kept out of slums. Overmastering his pity, however, was the thought that Esther had evidently not considered him. And after what he had done for her——!

"You don't care a hang for me? I wonder whether there are any faithful women left!"

Esther replied, with an ironic smile which nobody saw, "My friend, nearly all the faithful women get left!"

We admit that this feeble little joke was made at the wrong moment, and said to the wrong man. It would have softened Napier, it hardened our paladin, confirming him in the conviction that women were selfish and frivolous, and capable of jesting inopportunely. He had not yet recovered from the effects of Alice's reprehensible attack upon Sir Bedford Slufter's leg.

"I believe you are heartless, Esther."

"Perhaps."

"I'm sorry, but I can't release you from your promise yet. I must think of my wife first. Nobody knows better than you how hysterical she is. Look at yesterday and to-day. We must wait a bit longer. In a week or a fortnight she may be stronger."

"But Mr. Napier?" In her eagerness she panted, arousing his suspicions. "Let me tell him."

"Why?"

"It's his due. I owe him so much."

"And how much do you owe me? I hate to remind you of it. But don't you owe me more than you owe this doctor?"

Knowing that she had made an irretrievably false step she remained silent. In the darkness she felt his hand close firmly upon hers, and she knew that his mouth was close to her ear, when he whispered softly: "Esther, I have a question to ask you, which you must answer. Why did you run away from Mont Plaisir? Tell me the truth."

CHAPTER XXII

THE PALADIN LETS HIMSELF GO

ESTHER did not answer at once. In the darkness they sat side by side thinking of the past, and all that it had held. The woman had felt this man's strong arms about her; her heart had thrilled to his passionate embrace; her lips had clung to his. She could never forget that, nor could he.

She knew now that she had never loved him. He had fired a spark in her, a spark, no more, which had kindled a fire for another man. But he had loved her, and he still loved her. At his touch she realised this with a profound, ineradicable conviction. The knowledge stirred her to deepest pity, the pity which is not of kin to love, because in its unalloyed manifestation it can only live when love is dead.

"Why did you run away from Mont Plaisir?"

She wondered whether he dwelt designedly upon the name. Did he divine how greatly pleasure appealed to her? Did he feel in his heart the pangs which had torn her when she turned her back upon pleasure and the pretty things she loved?

"I explained in my letter."

"You used an odd expression. You said you could not pay the bill."

"I couldn't."

"Because you didn't love me enough?"

She caught the inflection of incredulity.

"Yes."

"Wasn't I good to you? Didn't I give you everything you wanted?"

"You withheld your confidence."

"I had to have time. I meant to marry you."

"Ah! You meant to marry me?"

"Didn't you know that?"

"You never mentioned marriage."

"Good heavens! You believed me capable of baseness, that I would take advantage, that——"

His hand tightened upon hers, so that she winced with the pain of it. In a faltering tone, she entreated him to be calm.

"Calm! I went to England to tell my uncle and mother that I meant to marry you. And I meant to marry you without asking any questions. And, while I was doing this, you were thinking that I held you lightly. You didn't trust me. And you wrecked my life and your own."

How could she reply brutally: "Not mine!" He continued vehemently: "I hurried back to find you gone. What a moment that was! And then——"

"Yes?"

"I tried to cast you out of my heart. My mother said that you had run away because you were not worthy, but now, since we have met again, there is something in your face which tells me she was mistaken, although then, worthy or unworthy, I wanted you. Well, I believed her. I said to myself that the worst must have happened."

"I was not unworthy," said Esther slowly; "the worst had not happend. It's strange, but it's so."

"It's come out on your dear face," he affirmed, with a passion which terrified her. "When we met again you seemed to me more beautiful, more desirable than ever. I read in your eyes all I wanted in a wife, all that I have not found."

"I entreat you to say no more."

"I'm going to have this out. You shall know exactly what you've done. I married a woman who danced into my life and out of it before the honeymoon was over. I've never cared for anybody except you. I care for you still. I'd marry you to-morrow if I were free."

"Harry, for pity's sake——!"

But he was beyond stopping. Since marriage, Harry had denied himself nothing. If he had lived honourably, finding favour in the eyes of men, such a life had pleased him, satisfying his desire to shine as a paladin, an exemplár of virtues sometimes too aggressively British. In lesser things he had considered nothing higher than the whim or appetite of the minute. He had "done himself" well, hailing the best of everything as "good enough" for him. His slightly ostentatious charity, his labours in the hunting-field, his services to the Conservative party, his devotion to his mother, had not cost him one tiny act of self-denial or fortitude. If he had kept clear of syrens, we know the reason. Had not a syren "let him down"? The only pain which he had ever suffered was inflicted by a woman's hand. Accordingly, he

shunned women, and was acclaimed, whether seriously or derisively, as a model husband. As a boy, cricket had kept him straight; as a man, sport and politics exhausted his energies. In spite of his big muscles, it is possible that he was always lacking in vitality and virility.

For the first time in his life he let himself go.

What he said need not be set down. He repeated himself in a primal and savage fashion. His lamentations had almost a Biblical tang to them. From the beginning, he implied that the Hand of the Lord had been heavy upon him. Job himself complained no more bitterly. David sang a less doleful *miserere*.

He had loved and lost, through no fault of his. He held himself impeccable. Tears were in his voice—and perhaps in his eyes: tears of pity for a good fellow, who had always been a "tryer" and "played the game."

He ended as he had begun.

"I loved you; I wanted to marry you; I'd marry you to-morrow if I were free. You are the one woman in the world for me, and always will be."

What could she say in reply?

She sat silent and still between the deep sea of truth into which she dared not plunge, and the devil which tempts all kind women to be compassionate to the men who love them and whom they cannot love.

Sabrina, with her power of seeing deep into the heart of things, might have replied: "My friend, this is madness which not even Midsummer would excuse; and we are in a growler, splashing through mud and mist.

You have wrecked your own life, if it is wrecked, which I don't for a moment believe. You were taught at great expense to play the game, and you have not played it. You take for granted that I love you. I don't love, I couldn't love you. And nothing would induce me to marry you if you were free. If I had loved you, I should not have left Mont Plaisir, whether you held me lightly or not. And a man of your experience ought to know this. Your tale has moved me to pity and, I say it for your ultimate good, to contempt. It has stirred me almost to tears, and almost to laughter. Now, please tell the cabby to drive us back to Cavendish Square."

Could Esther say this—or anything like it?

And being the woman she was, suffering, as has been said, from a superfluity of intelligence and sympathy, seeing so clearly the pathos and poignancy of the situation, the lamentable difference between what the man was and what he might have been, unable to speak with candour for fear of hurting a benefactor, desperately sorry for him, for herself, and sorriest of all for the wife to whom she had given back a life not worth living, is it matter for surprise or criticism that she bowed her head and wept bitterly?

Of course, our paladin misinterpreted those tears, which fell indeed like soft rain upon his burning soul. The tear-drops washed away misgivings. *She had loved him!* And she bolted because she believed that he, her lover, was about to present a monstrous bill. He admired Esther for choosing poverty instead of dishonour. It was amazing that she had not trusted him

and held him blameless, but, granting that a sordid experience had discoloured her view of men, what could she do but bolt? These thoughts flew into his mind like homing pigeons, and cooed there melodiously. At last, he reflected, she saw him as he was. And she wept because she had not trusted him.

"Poor little woman," he whispered.

He could have chosen no better words to dry her tears; and when he tried to slip an enterprising arm around her waist, she recovered her composure and her sense of humour.

"I must go back to your wife," she said.

The paladin withdrew his hand.

"Ah! my wife!" he exclaimed.

"You persist," her voice grew steadier, "in your refusal to let me tell Mr. Napier the truth?"

Napier aroused no vague alarms in him now, but he answered peremptorily: "Certainly, I refuse. And I understand all you would have me infer, when you say that you must go back to my wife. And I must go back to my wife. I know that."

"Then, will you leave me?"

"If you wish it."

"I must have time to recover."

He stopped the cab and got out without further words, directing the cabman to drive back to Cavendish Square. Esther saw him pay the man, and then he turned to her, his face faintly illumined by an electric light shining through the still thick mist. He raised his hat, and stood bareheaded, while he whispered:

"I'm glad you know how it is with me. I'm not one of those who change. Good-night, dear Esther."

"Good-night," she said stiffly.

She dined alone at a cheap restaurant, returning to Harley Street about ten. Going to her room, she met Peach, who eyed her with an insolent stare, and passed with a sniff and a toss of the head.

CHAPTER XXIII

AT THE TELEPHONE

A WEEK later, Sir Bedford Slufter's perfectly appointed carriage drew up at Napier's door. From it descended the great man, to be ushered into the library, where Napier received him with wrinkled front.

"Very kind of you to come at once."

"Not at all, not at all. How is our patient?"

"I'm very much worried about her."

Sir Bedford, with a paternal gesture, laid his plump hand upon Napier's shoulder.

"My dear fellow, you must be aware that whenever worry affects a medical man, it reacts injuriously upon his patient. I never allow myself to worry—never. Even when the worst comes to the worst, I say to myself—er——"

"All is lost except our fees."

Sir Bedford chuckled.

"Ha—ha! Ve-ry good! Ve-ry neat! All is lost except our fees. Capital! You will allow me to repeat your *bon mot* to His Royal Highness? He has a sense of humour."

"You saw the charts a week ago?"

"I did. A remarkable record; steady improvement, steady gain of weight. Ve-ry satisfactory."

"Look at these."

He handed to Sir Bedford half a dozen sheets of

paper. The great man, pince-nez upon nose, perused them with gravity and concern, pursing a dubious lower lip and shaking his Olympian head.

"Dear, dear! Increased irritability. Loss of appetite and weight. God bless me!"

He stared, open-mouthed, at Napier, who said gloomily: "This confounded change followed, you will notice, hard on the heels of Lord Camber's first visit. He has been here every day. Every day my stitches have been unpicked."

Sir Bedford dropped heavily into an arm-chair.

"My dear Napier," he protested, "I can't let this pass unchallenged. If words mean anything, you imply that Lord Camber is responsible for this reaction. I have the highest regard for Camber. I have known him ever since I brought him into the world. He's the soul of honour and chivalry, quite a Bayard, I assure you."

"He appears all that," said Napier irritably; "but something went wrong in his baking."

Sir Bedford's expression indicated that this was not the happiest way of speaking of a peer with forty thousand a year.

"One must expect slight relapses in these cases; ebb and flow, systole and diastole."

"This is not a slight relapse. The cardiac trouble is very serious. I thought I had it in hand. Something which eludes me has brought it back. I'm thinking of banishing the husband and the maid, that old woman, Peach, who is a mischief-maker, if I ever clapped eyes on one."

"You must do as you deem proper."

"You say you brought Camber into the world?"

"I did, indeed; a fine lusty boy, weighed eleven pounds."

"And you've known him intimately ever since?"

"On and off—on and off."

"Is he entangled with any woman?"

"My dear friend, who can answer such questions? He has, I am sure deservedly, the reputation of being a devoted son and a devoted husband. I live in the world; I hear a number of unpleasant stories, but never a word against Camber's character. I believe him to be a Bayard, as I said just now. Entangled with a woman? Impossible. Years ago he paid attention, I remember, to some girl who lived in Palace Gardens."

"He did not want his wife to get well."

"Napier! This is morbid—monstrous!"

"Hold hard."

He described Harry's expression seen in the looking-glass. Sir Bedford remained unconvinced.

"How do we know what he had in his mind? In my judgment you have leaped to an unwarrantable conclusion."

"I should like to think so. Meanwhile my patient is going back."

"Do you wish me to see her?"

"It might frighten her. I wanted to ask about Camber. He seems to be perfection. Then perfection disagrees with my patient. Thank you very much."

Sir Bedford went his way, slightly perturbed, but consoling himself with the reflection that he himself

had always been pessimistic about Lady Camber. Napier, to be sure, had tinkered her up in a wonderful fashion, but—well, well, he personally had never been sanguine of a really lasting improvement. Napier, however, had a pretty wit. That "mot" of his! The Prince would enjoy it immensely and, likely as not, repeat it in august circles.

Upstairs, upon the first floor, Lady Camber was being weighed by Esther. Outwardly, the preceding week had wrought little change. She and Peach believed that health and strength had been restored. So strong was this conviction that both mistress and maid regarded Esther's never-failing vigilance as unnecessary. Peach, as we know, had good reason to think the worst of Esther, and only by the exercise of strenuous self-denial was she able to postpone the *éclaircissement* which would reveal the "darling of a nurse" as a snake in the grass. Affection for Alice kept her silent. Nevertheless, not once, but a score of times, the secret which she hugged had almost slipped from her grasp. And to Esther her manner had become undisguisedly insolent. Esther, setting this down to jealousy, behaved with undiminished civility and good-temper.

The scales recorded a loss of two pounds.

"Don't look so distressed," said Esther. "From your expression you might have lost a near relation."

"I could spare some of them, on my husband's side. Two precious pounds gone."

Still grumbling to herself, Alice lay down upon the sofa. Esther fetched the clinical thermometer.

"Bother! What's the use of that now?"

"Please!"

Sullenly, Alice obeyed, but, holding the thermometer in her mouth, she winked and grimaced at Peach while Esther, with her back turned, was pouring out a glass of milk, taken now in daily diminishing doses. At this moment the telephone tinkled. Esther picked up the instrument.

"Certainly; I'll come at once."

Napier wished to see her, she explained, as she handed the milk to her patient, taking the thermometer and looking at it.

"Well, is it all right?"

"Yes; same as yesterday."

"You wouldn't tell me what it was yesterday. It's so stupid making a mystery of it now that I'm well."

"Doctor's orders." Esther recorded the temperature on the day's chart.

"How I loathe this milk!"

"Think what it has done for your complexion. Down with it. You won't move till I come back?"

"Tommy-rot again."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

With a smile Esther vanished. As soon as the door had closed, Alice handed the glass of milk to Peach. "Pour it away," she commanded.

"My lady?"

"Do as I tell you. Why *do* you wear such large boots?"

"Because I 'ave large feet, I suppose," retorted the old dresser, scowling at her.

"Don't be cheeky! Take that milk away, go into the bedroom, and stay there. I don't need you."

"Yes, you do," said Peach acidly. "You need me more than you ever needed me in your life."

"What do you mean by that?"

Peach, aware that she had said too much, muttered, "Nothing," and then vanished. Alice stared at her ungainly retreating figure. "She did mean something," she thought.

Downstairs in the library Napier was talking to Esther.

"Temperature up?"

"Ninety-nine and a half."

"That settles it. I shall pack the old woman out of the house to-day, and get rid of the husband to-morrow. Those two have caused this relapse. We've been going much too fast. Is your patient very irritable?"

"Very."

"You look weather-worn, nurse. And we thought we were sailing along so smoothly. Well, you have handled her wonderfully; which reminds me that you had better speak to her about the maid's going. Is she likely to make a rumpus?"

"I don't think so. Lady Camber treats her maid roughly; and when she's nice to me the poor faithful

old soul chatters with rage. I agree with you that the sooner she goes the better."

"Right; speak to your patient at once, and report. One moment, please. We must keep her very quiet for the next ten days. But it's all-important that she should not suspect this. That is why I wish you to speak to her about Peach. She might ask me awkward questions. You, of course, will know nothing."

Esther hesitated, then she said with a faint smile, "'Doctor's orders' are a red rag to her."

"Then don't wave it. I leave it to your tact. By the way, what did you do with those memoranda you jotted down six weeks ago?"

"They are in the laboratory, Mr. Napier. I'll find them for you when I come back. Am I to break it to my patient that Lord Camber is to be exiled?"

"No; one thing at a time. I'll attend to that."

Esther nodded and returned to her patient, whom she found alone.

"Where is your maid, Lady Camber?"

Alice answered fretfully, "I got rid of her; she bores me."

The opportunity was too good to be missed. Esther sat down by the sofa, and said quietly: "I have noticed Peach gets a little on your nerves. Don't you think it would be wise to send her back to Grosvenor Square till you are a little stronger?"

"I'm strong enough."

"Convalescence is a trying time. And you ought to give yourself every possible chance. If Peach irritates you, and I see that she does——"

"She does; stupid old fool!"

"In that case——"

"I'm jolly glad you've mentioned it. Call her, please, and I'll tell her to be off."

"Not before me."

"Why not?"

"She is absurdly jealous of me. I wouldn't hurt her feelings for the world. And promise me that you will do it quietly and kindly. You can tell her the truth; that we have been going a little too fast. But be nice to her. It costs so little and it means so much."

"You're a good sort, nurse. I've been beastly to you lately."

"I knew you were on edge."

"Do you know why I was beastly?"

"No."

"I caught Camber looking at you in a way I didn't like. And that's not all. When we were alone, he's talked about you when I wanted him to talk about me. Of course I'm a jealous fool. Why shouldn't Camber like you if I like you? But you've something which I haven't, a sort of distinction which appeals to him. You don't look as if you'd been born on the Surrey side of the river. There! It's out, and I'm glad of it."

Esther said slowly, "Lord Camber has been very"—she hesitated for a word, and a slightly derisive smile formed itself about Alice's mouth—"very attentive during the last week, hasn't he?"

"Oh—very!" She mimicked Esther with extraor-

dinary fidelity. "Lord Camber has been very, very attentive during the last week."

"You *are* clever! I can hear myself speaking."

Alice resumed her own voice, with its petulant inflections.

"All the same, he was pretending. I'm positive he doesn't care a hang for me. Attentive! Suffering Moses! When a woman is starving for kisses, do you think she is satisfied with flowers and compliments? Please call Peach!"

"You will be nice to her?"

"Yes."

So the faithful one was summoned, and Esther, to make things easy, explained that she had promised to find some memoranda mislaid in the laboratory. Upon the threshold of the door, she turned to deliver last instructions.

"Don't let my patient move, Mrs. Peach."

"She's safe enough in my 'ands," retorted the old dresser, "although they are big and red and clumsy."

"You're a silly old dear," said Alice.

At the word "dear" Peach's face softened, and being ordered to sit down, she did so with complacency, as if exercising a long-withheld privilege. She could remember the day when Alice Snelling and she met as equals upon Clapham Common. And they had been friends, although five and thirty years lay between them. Peach was an ugly old maid then as now, but whenever she found herself alone with the pretty, blooming Alice, her desiccated old heart seemed to put forth buds of maternal tenderness. Alice had never

been what Esther called "nice" to her. And yet, in her way, Alice had been loyal and, when prosperity came to her, not ungenerous. Peach received a larger wage than that usually paid to experienced maids; and she was not experienced, and never would be.

"Peach," said Alice, after a pause, "I'm going to send you back to Grosvenor Square."

"You are, are you? Well, I ain't a-going."

"You're a faithful old thing, and you mean well, but you get on my nerves. It's best to be honest. As Nurse Yorke says, I must give myself every chance."

"Nurse Yorke says that, does she?"

Her hands, lying upon her lap, clenched themselves; ugly lines showed deep upon her forehead and about her tightly-compressed lips. Her knees shook.

"You are wiggling your leg now. That sort of thing drives me perfectly wild. And if you could see your own face at this moment——!"

"I don't want to see my face. I know well enough that I was be'ind the door when looks was bein' served out."

"I am not going to argue with you. Nurse Yorke thinks you came too soon."

"Really! Nurse thinks I came too soon. So I did. I don't deny it. Put me face to face with 'er, and I'll admit it."

"You are behaving like an idiot. Nurse Yorke has been very civil to you, and you've been outrageously rude to her. I've noticed it, and, at her request, I said nothing."

"At her request! Oh my!"

The old woman was working herself into a frenzy of rage. Till now, she had held her tongue; but certainly the time had come to speak, to deliver her soul, overburthened with weighty proofs of black treachery and shame. She believed her mistress to be perfectly strong. This keeping her a prisoner was a detestable plot on the part of a faithless husband and a shameless woman. Indigation seethed within her, and boiled over.

"I ain't a-going to stand this. There's an objec' in gettin' rid of me."

"An object? You're the object. What are you shaking like that for?"

"I'm shakin' with rage; and, look here, if anybody's going out of this house, bag and baggage, and more baggage than bag, it ain't me."

"Are you crazy?"

"Nurse Yorke is a-going. That 'ussy ain't fit to touch yer."

"What?"

Peach leaned forward, shaking her hands, a-quiver with passion, speaking in an intense, truth-compelling voice which carried conviction to the poor creature at her mercy. She had wit enough to exaggerate nothing. She described the scene on the staircase, the meeting beneath the Bentinck statue, the waiting cab, the disappearance of the guilty pair, and, finally, Esther's late return to Harley Street. Alice never moved. She lay there stunned and dizzy, hearing and feeling nothing but the throbbing of her own heart. It throbbed irregularly; now with hammer-like strength and regu-

larity, now slowly, feebly, and fitfully. Peach became alarmed.

"My lady, you ain't goin' to take this too 'ard, are you? Men will be men, and when it's thrown at 'em in chunks——!"

"I can't believe it!" gasped Alice, but she believed every word of it.

"My lord wrote 'er a long letter this morning."

"How do you know that?"

Her wits were coming back, and with them a curious sense of strength and determination. She sat up, and the colour flowed into her cheeks.

"I saw it on the hall table. Brazen, I call it! Many's the letter from my lord to you that I've—that I've seen. I know his twiggley g's and h's as well as I know the shape of your nose."

"How she has humbugged me with her soft voice!" She began to imitate Esther. "'Shall I read to you? Are you perfectly comfortable?' And all the time——! I feel as if I could kill her!"

"My lady, please lie down."

"Not yet. Peach, I must see Lord Camber. I must have it out; I can't stand suspense, never could."

She stood up, and waving Peach aside, began to walk up and down the room. Suddenly, she stopped at the telephone.

"I'll 'phone him to come here at once."

"Do you think that, bein' a perfect gentleman, my lord 'll give 'er away? Never!"

Alice picked up the instrument, which communicated

with the hall, hesitated, glanced at Peach, and then said slowly, "He might not come for me."

"He would for 'er."

"For her?" She nodded. "That's an idea. Take the 'phone. Tell the man to get me connected with our number, 00746 Gerrard."

Peach obeyed, and with a frightened look upon her face. There was something about her mistress which she had never seen before: an inflexibility of purpose, the will dominating the body. Alice took the instrument from Peach's hand and waited. When she spoke, she had assumed Esther's voice.

"Of all the artful dodgers!" muttered Peach.

"Is Lord Camber at home? He is? Please tell his lordship that Nurse Yorke, Nurse—Yorke—yes, wishes to speak to him."

Peach sat down, trembling. She had lighted a fuse which was about to fire a mine. And conviction seized her that her act had been premature, and that the explosion would injure the one person whom she desired to save. She covered her face with the rough, clumsy hands which had worked long and faithfully for Alice, and waited.

"Was the voice all right?" said Alice in a whisper.

Peach made a futile effort to extinguish the fuse.

"My lady, chuck it. Don't pretend to be that 'ussy. You may 'ear something awful. It ain't the game for you. Ask my lord to come here in your own voice."

"Hold your tongue," said Alice.

Peach saw a terrible smile upon Alice's lips, no longer pink but tinged with blue, in striking contrast

to her flushed cheeks. Then she heard Esther's soft voice reproduced with a perfection that confounded her.

"Yes, yes, it is I—Esther. Can you come here at once? Oh! you can, at great inconvenience, to please me! Eh? Did I get your letter this morning? Yes. My answer? Not through a telephone! You say you know that the answer will be 'yes.' How do you know that? Do you mean that you never would have written such a letter unless you had known what the answer would be. What? I'm your darling, am I? Eh? No—I won't. Don't be absurd! Come at once. Good-bye."

With a steady hand she replaced the instrument, and turned to Peach, cowering in her chair.

"You heard what I said?"

"Yes."

Alice laughed.

"I think we can guess what was in that letter."

"My lady, lie down."

"Yes; I'll lie down. She may be back any minute. I'm feeling astonishingly fit. He asked me to send a kiss through the 'phone." She laughed again. "Don't look so miserable. We're going to have some fun. But I want an audience. We must have the doctor, and his precious nurse, the best in the world, and his lordship, who has been so very *attentive!* Attentive—to *her!*" She lay down upon the sofa, with the same set smile upon her face, showing the white teeth between the bluish lips. Tears trickled down Peach's cheeks.

"I wish I'd killed myself before I spoke."

"I'm glad you had the honesty to speak. Stop crying at once."

"Very good, my lady."

"Not that it matters. She'll think you're howling because you have to leave me. Give me that paper."

An illustrated paper lay on the table. Alice turned over its pages, waiting for Esther to return. Within a few minutes Esther entered.

"You hav'n't moved?"

"No," said Alice. "You can go now, Peach."

"Thank you, my lady."

As soon as nurse and patient were alone, Esther said, "I hope you made it plain to her that in a very short time my services to you will be at an end."

"She understands that perfectly," said Alice.

CHAPTER XXIV

WE BEHOLD THE PALADIN CORNERED

BEFORE the paladin enters, we must record certain trifling events which, in combination, led to the writing of that letter to which allusion has just been made. Since the interview in the cab, Harry and Esther had not met except in Alice's presence. As you may imagine such a stickler for propriety as Harry had taken particular pains to behave to his wife's nurse with that happy mixture of courtesy and gratitude which the case warranted. Nevertheless, the wife had intercepted a glance which aroused jealousy and helped to retard convalescence. There had been other glances which she had not intercepted. To say that these furtive manifestations distressed Esther is to put it mildly. And her distress became the more acute, because she was so sorry for Harry and so unwilling to wound him by putting into brutal words what she had come to recognise as a fact—that he bored her to tears. Also she resented intensely his attitude towards Alice; and she could have shaken him when he was "attentive" in his cold-blooded, smiling fashion. Behind this, never to be forgotten, was the overwhelming debt she owed him. The mere thought of it palsied action. At night she lay awake, obsessed by a vague terror, the presentiment of approaching evil so curiously strong in many women. Such sleep as she snatched from these

baleful hours was uneasy and troubled by nightmare imaginings. Each morning she awoke terribly tired, hardly able to drag herself out of bed. And these symptoms had preceded the nervous breakdown which came upon her after the nursing of the Duchess of Belbury. And, in an even more aggravated form, they had tormented her in the Southampton slum, culminating, as we know, in the overthrow of mind and memory. To many of us the possibility of losing one's reason is a more terrible matter than insanity itself. Esther was aware that the insane are not unhappy, as a rule—very much the contrary. But she could never think without horror of those weeks when she became a sort of child, who kissed a strange Mr. Browne and sat on his knee. She prayed that she might die rather than again live on as somebody else.

Of course Harry's furtive glances could only mean one thing—he believed that she returned his love. We may hazard the conjecture that his confidence on this point opened her eyes wider to the fact that, so far from loving him, she adored somebody else—his antithesis in every respect. She knew that her fit of weeping in the cab had been accepted by Harry as a sort of unconditional surrender. The thought that she had been so weak at the moment when the exercise of common-sense and courage would have saved both of them made her furious with herself and with him. She had made up her mind to write, when his letter arrived and the envelope caught the eye of the faithful Peach. We present it in full:

My Dear Esther,—For a week I have tried to find an opportunity to see you alone, but the difficulties have been too much for me. And in another week, or at most a fortnight, my wife will return to my house. This doctor has hinted that her illness was largely due to indifference on my part. To day, she has recovered her health, but I cannot help remarking that I seem to distress her, although you must know that I have done everything in my power to co-operate cordially in her cure. I seem to irritate the poor creature, and Heaven knows she irritates me, sometimes beyond endurance. For the future our lives must lie apart. I am not one to tamper rashly with the marriage laws of this country, still I have always held the opinion that in certain cases the outward observance of them might well be a greater offence against true morality than their breach. I lay emphasis upon this, for whether you say 'Yes' or 'No' to the question I am about to put, I shall certainly live apart from Lady Camber for the future, and nothing will shake me in that resolve.

And now, have you the pluck to seize happiness when it is offered to you by the man who has always loved you devotedly? Will you trust yourself to me? I am incapable of taking advantage of such trust. We will go back to Mont Plaisir, if you like, and wait patiently till my wife divorces me. That she will do so as speedily as possible I have no doubt. Then, and not till then, our real life together will begin. I shall say no more. Let what I have done in the past plead for me now. Had woman ever a more faithful lover than I have been? We love each other, all the sweetness of the world lies in those four words.

Your devoted, faithful

Harry.

Upon reading this effusion, Esther's first impulse was to scribble "No" upon a telegraph form and despatch it. She felt she could not meet Harry till this was done. Then she remembered that he was not coming to Harley Street upon that day, under plea of an important engagement. Accordingly, she decided to write, and went about her work turning over

certain sentences in her mind. Few men and women engrossed in their own work find time or inclination to force duty upon others. Esther, probably, would have held her peace, had she not sympathised so ardently with Alice, whose very life depended upon Harry's fidelity and kindness. To make this plain to a man who, admittedly, had some fine qualities would be really worth while, and a new way of paying an old debt. She became enthusiastic over the alchemy of it—the transmuting of base metal into gold; and, forced to take action, felt relieved of the intolerable burden of passivity.

Such was the temper of her mind and spirit, when Buckle ushered Lord Camber into his wife's sitting-room. The paladin appeared in golfing kit. He passed Esther with a discreet bow and smile, and saluted Alice.

"Dropped in for a minute just to see how you were this morning."

Alice turned a sparkling pair of eyes upon his stockings. There had been moments when Esther was forced to the conclusion that Harry's underpinning was better than his understanding.

"You had an important engagement to play golf."

"Oh, ah! Ye-es. Mornin', Nurse!"

"Good-morning, Lord Camber."

"What a colour you have, Alice. I must really have a chat with Nurse Yorke presently, and find out what she does to you."

Alice said sharply: "Do you want to say some-

thing to Nurse Yorke that you can't say here before me?"

Harry laughed genially. His voice had never been so easy and pleasant as he replied: "You dear soul! You know Napier's ironclad rules. No discussion of the patient's condition before her! Quite sound! But I want details. Everything Nurse Yorke tells me interests me enormously."

"I dare say. Harry, what's the real reason that brings you here?"

"I wanted to hear the last word."

"There was the telephone."

"Like a good husband I wanted to see with my own eyes just how you were."

Esther, turning her back, moved across to the chimney-piece.

"I've lost two pounds in two days. I'm not quite so well. I thought perhaps someone had *sent* for you."

Esther marked her emphasis on the verb.

"What ideas you have, Alice."

"That's not an answer. Did anyone in this house send for you?"

He hesitated for a second, before he answered emphatically: "Nobody."

"You—liar!"

"Alice!"

As she spoke, she sat up, pointing at him a denunciatory finger. Instantly, she became transformed into a beautiful Fury. Fire seemed to flash from her eyes. Esther, appalled at the change, hurried forward.

"Lady Camber——!"

"Hold your tongue!" In a more restrained but tenser tone, she addressed her husband: "I know why you came here. To carry on a shameful intrigue with this woman."

"Good heavens!"

"I know—everything."

"What do you know, Alice?" He spoke sullenly, in a thick, bewildered tone.

"Enough to drive any wife crazy."

She stood up with a certain dignity. In a trembling voice Esther said: "Lady Camber, for your own sake I beseech you to lie down."

"To lie down! And you, and you, have struck me this blow while I have been lying down. But now I'm up and strong, able to defend myself, to strike back. Everybody in this house shall know what manner of woman you are. Send for Mr. Napier. I want to see his face when I tell him that his precious humbug of a nurse—the best in the world—is no better than a drab out of the streets."

"How dare you?" thundered Harry.

Esther interposed, very pale, but calm and even at that moment thinking of her patient, and of her instructions.

"Lord Camber, remember that she is still weak. Lady Camber, there is some horrible mistake."

"Mistake! We'll see. Harry, you pride yourself upon being an honest gentleman. Do you love this woman?"

He flung a hunted glance at Esther. She responded with an imperative message not to be misinterpreted.

If he were truly a gentleman, let him lie now—magnificently. But the message was intercepted by an intelligence more acute than our paladin's.

"Do you think he can throw dust in my eyes? Harry, swear to me, if you can"—she seized his arm —"swear to me that this woman is nothing to you."

He opened his lips and closed them.

"You can't." She laughed drearily, relaxing her grasp of his arm as if relinquishing all that made life worth living. Then passion again shook her as she turned to Esther: "And you, will you swear that this man is nothing to you?"

"Yes," said Esther steadily. "He is—nothing."

Afterwards, it came to her that she could have said no word more likely to inflame her patient. To Alice, the denial was so false, so shameless, so impudent, that it broke down all barriers and conventions. She became the primal woman, aflame to wipe out insult with injury.

"You—you——!"

She raised her hand to strike, hesitated, gave a piteous gasp, and then, tearing convulsively at the chiffon about her neck, staggered and fell insensible at her husband's feet.

"She has fainted," said Harry hoarsely. Esther was on her knees beside the stricken woman, as Peach rushed in from the bedroom.

"You've killed her between you!" she exclaimed fiercely.

"Hold your tongue!" said Harry.

"Fetch Mr. Napier," said Esther.

She looked at Harry, who obeyed. The two women lifted Alice on to the sofa. She lay there insensible, breathing heavily and with grinding effort.

"What did you tell her?" said Esther. She divined that Peach had caused this terrible trouble during those few minutes spent in the laboratory searching for the mislaid memoranda. Peach answered grimly: "What did I tell her? Never mind what I told 'er. She knows you ain't fit to touch 'er!"

"If Lady Camber dies," said Esther dully, "you have killed her."

"Reely. I wonder what Mr. Napier will say to that?"

Esther, in silence, continued her ministrations, the application of such remedies as were at hand. She worked mechanically, doing all that was possible, but her brain was in confusion. She could no longer think lucidly. A monstrous terror possessed her; a hideous conviction blurred and distorted mental vision. "I am going mad—I am going mad," she repeated to herself, and then in despairing protest—"Not that, O God! anything but that!"

Napier entered, followed by Harry. Confronted with an emergency, the doctor had become cool and impassive. Not a trace of nervousness was visible, as he examined his patient swiftly and in silence. When he spoke his voice seemed to Esther the voice of some implacable judge. Knowing nothing, as yet, he held her responsible.

"Run to the laboratory," he said, "fetch some ether."

Esther sped from the room. Napier stood up, looking at Harry.

"How did this happen, Lord Camber?"

"I can tell you everything," said Peach, in a whimper. She had begun to blame herself, but not as she blamed these others.

"Leave the room!" commanded Harry.

"Yes," said Napier.

Peach hesitated, but went. After all, she reflected, her tale would keep. This doctor would be glad enough to listen to her presently.

"Can't you do something?" said Harry.

"Not yet. How did this come to pass?"

Our paladin answered mumblingly. This, in itself, was not unnatural, but it struck Napier as odd that he should pick and choose his words.

"I dropped in to see how my wife was," he began. "It annoyed her to discover that I was going to play golf. She got rather excited and—and hysterical. Then she stood up."

"She stood up? Nurse Yorke permitted that?"

"We tried to prevent her. She began a rigmarole about my not loving her, and then, suddenly, she collapsed."

"I see."

"She behaved like a mad woman," added Harry. Then an inspiration came to him. "That woman Peach has made trouble."

"I knew it," murmured Napier.

"She said something just now about telling you everything. She wasn't present." His voice sank to

a whisper: "And I ought to warn you that she's unscrupulous and a liar."

"I'm obliged to you," said Napier, drily, as Esther entered. He addressed her in a curt professional tone: "We must get Lady Camber to bed at once. Lord Camber, will you wait here?"

Alice was carried into the bedroom, and an instant later Peach came out, red in the face and trembling with rage. She passed Harry with a furious glare.

"Where are you going?"

"To fetch Nurse Richards."

"One moment, please."

He came towards her, with a sudden resolution flushing his face.

"I don't know your game, my woman, but you mean mischief."

"Per—'aps."

"Just so. Per—haps! Have you saved much?"

"Nothing to speak of. Why?"

"You're not a fool, and you ought to know by this time that your mistress will drop you like a broken crutch when you cease to be of service to her."

"Reely? And when she drops me, I'm to come to you, my lord, eh?"

The cunning of a woman born in Whitechapel, and as a child constrained to fight for her own hand with prematurely sharpened wits, gleamed in her small beady eyes.

"Yes, you'll come to me; and I'll settle on you enough to keep you out of the workhouse, because you had your ear to the keyhole just now."

"Yes, I did. I'm not ashamed of it neither."

"I think we understand each other?"

"We do. But I dessay, if needful, your lordship will set it down in black and white?"

"If you hold your tongue—yes. A pound a week! Now go and fetch Nurse Richards."

As Peach disappeared, Harry wiped his forehead. He told himself that he was in a tight place from which will and resource must extricate him. He listened. No sound came from the bedroom. He wondered vaguely why the other nurse had been summoned. He sat down to make some plan of campaign. If he could only see Esther! Together, they could surely find a way out of this confounded wood. Alice's extraordinary outbreak was due, of course, to jealousy. By some mischance she had found out that he had talked to Esther through the telephone. She could know nothing of what had passed within the last week.

He was hugging this comfort to his soul, and deriving a certain amount of warmth from it, when Esther entered.

"Nurse Richards has taken my place," she explained.

"Why?"

"I had to tell Mr. Napier that it might imperil my patient's chance if she found me in attendance when she recovered consciousness."

"Has she recovered consciousness?"

"No."

"What on earth brought this about? Esther, we

must put our heads together. How strangely you look!"

"I feel strange. Mr. Napier holds me responsible for this."

"How did Alice find out that you had telephoned to me?"

"Telephoned to you?"

She repeated the words, staring at him, asking herself if she had telephoned to him, if, already, her memory was beginning to play her false.

"I was not long in getting here, was I?"

"I never telephoned to you."

"What?"

"I never telephoned to you."

"But, it was your voice. You asked me to come here at once."

"Somebody else, not I."

She put her hand to her head, as if by that simple gesture she might evoke greater order out of chaos.

"Pull yourself together, Esther! You're dazed, and no wonder! But we haven't a moment. We had a long talk through the telephone. I'd know your voice among ten thousand."

"I was not there."

"Then who was? Good heavens! Not, not—Alice? Yes—it must have been Alice!"

"She can mimic me exactly. What did you say to her?"

Gradually her strength was returning. Harry's bewilderment seemed to have a tonic effect. She perceived that Alice, possibly out of mere mischief, had

called up Harry in her name. But, as yet, the probable consequence had not developed itself.

"What did you say?"

He turned aside his eyes.

"I spoke of that letter I wrote last night. Fortunately, I didn't say what was in it!"

"Oh, that letter! That you should have dared to write it!"

"Dared?"

"Oh, how could you write it? You don't understand what you have done."

With a tremendous effort she detached her mind from consideration of her own feelings.

"Tell me exactly what you said through the telephone."

"I'm afraid I gave myself away. We must face that."

"Poor woman! Poor, unhappy creature!"

"Esther, I'm horrified at what has happened. But Alice brought this on herself. How dared she pretend to be you!"

"Poor thing!" murmured Esther, obsessed by the vision of this weak, loving woman listening to her own death sentence.

"We must make plans. I have squared Peach already."

"You have squared Peach!"

"Promised her a pension!"

At last Esther was beginning to see clearly, with a vision which throws one particular object into perfect focus to the exclusion of what may surround it. And

that object was herself, enmeshed by circumstance, by lies, by a thousand threads fine as those composing a spider's web.

"You have bribed this servant to lie, and you are about to ask me to lie, and you will lie."

"First and last we must lie to save her. She knows nothing—remember that! I shall tell Napier about the telephone, before Alice tells him. I shall make him believe that the whole thing was a joke."

"A joke!"

"I guessed that Alice was impersonating you. Do you see? And then, to carry on the joke, I played up. Why not?"

"That you should ask such a question!"

"Well, and what do you propose?"

"To tell Mr. Napier everything, when he comes out of that room. Here and now, before I go mad."

As the thought of her poor mind failing again presented itself, she trembled, relaxed by that abominable enervation which she had come to recognise and dread as a physical lesion. Harry, seeing her weakness, began to put increasing faith in his own strength.

"Has it struck you," he asked, "that Napier may not believe your story?"

"He must, if you corroborate it."

"And if I—don't? You are driving me into a corner, Esther. Are you quite fair to me? You accuse me of asking you to lie. I am incapable of that. If dirty work has to be done, I shall do it. All I ask is silence, which always baffles a clever man."

"Who will take my silence against Lady Camber's speech?"

"I shall answer my wife. This matter concerns us far more than you. You know nothing; you were not at the telephone; you are at a loss to understand your patient's violence."

Esther shuddered. She heard his soft voice, which long ago had been sweeter than any music to hear: "Trust me, dear. Believe that I will act for the best in her interest and in yours, not in my own, I swear."

She could not speak, trying to weigh his words, praying that she might be guided to do the right thing, and piteously aware that the time for doing it had passed for ever. Harry's voice took an even softer inflection, as he whispered: "Would you try to clear yourself at my expense?"

She stared at him helplessly. Did speech to Napier mean that? Yes, Napier would believe her. She *could* clear herself in his eyes, at the expense of the man who had saved her life and reason. And silence meant the discharge of her debt and the loss of Napier's confidence. The two issues shone out of the darkness. Very heavily, she replied: "I shall not clear myself at your expense."

"I knew you wouldn't," he exclaimed ardently.

CHAPTER XXV

TALIN

HARRY walked to the window. He had been trained in a school which leaves well enough alone, and in obtaining from Esther a renewal of her pledge, he was aware that enough for the moment had been accomplished. Any reference to his letter, any further assertion of his fidelity would be, he reflected, untimely and ill-bred. How gallantly Esther had confronted Alice! And, obviously, she was worn out, almost crazy, by the stress of circumstances.

He turned his thoughts resolutely from the wife who was struggling for breath in the next room. Not for one moment did he believe that her condition was serious. These doctors always exaggerated; then always, after a cure had been effected, they took the greater credit to themselves. The outward change in Alice, the force and fire with which she had spoken, convinced him that her complete recovery was a mere matter of days. This affair was unfortunate, shocking, but she had brought it on herself.

He was fortifying himself with these reflections when Napier entered the room. Esther had sat down, closing her eyes, which were throbbing with neuralgic pain, and, for the moment, letting herself drift upon a tide which was sweeping her into an unknown but troublous

sea. She heard Napier's step, and rose to receive him.

"Is she better?"

"There is not likely to be a change. Lord Camber, Nurse Yorke, will you come down to the library?"

They followed him in silence. His face had altered in expression; impassivity had given place to a hard intentness, the look of a man wrestling with some difficult problem. He went to his desk on reaching the library. When he spoke his voice was incisively, coldly judicial. Esther felt that he had suspended judgment. He addressed her first:

"You told me that Nurse Richards had better take your place, because your patient was incensed with you. Can you account for her being incensed with you?"

"I can," said Harry. "I'm going to speak with entire frankness, Mr. Napier."

Napier bowed a frigid acknowledgment.

"Very thoughtlessly, I have been the cause of this anger on Lady Camber's part against Nurse Yorke. An unfortunate joke has brought about the catastrophe."

"A joke?"

"My wife is a capital mimic. In fact, she achieved celebrity as a mimic. I presume that during her rest-cure she amused herself by learning to mimic her nurse. To-day, as you know, it had been settled that I was not to call. As a matter of fact I had promised to play golf. A man must take some exercise. Lady Camber may have resented my not coming as usual.

'At least I infer as much. And then, she was unhappily inspired to play a practical joke on me. She telephoned to me in Nurse Yorke's name."

"You permitted this?" Napier asked Esther.

"I was absent, looking for your memoranda."

"True! Go on, Lord Camber."

"For a moment she completely took me in. I believed that Nurse Yorke was asking me to come here at once. And I took for granted that there was a reason. I said that I would come."

"And then?"

"It is not easy to put into words what followed."

"If you will speak, as you suggest, with entire frankness."

"Quite—quite! At the moment when I promised to come as soon as possible, I recognised my wife's voice. Naturally I, on my side, attempted, in retaliation, you know, to have a little bit of harmless fun at her expense."

"Yes."

Our paladin began to grow warm beneath a glance assuredly cold enough to keep him cool. And he resented Napier's attitude. Why did the fellow stand, when his guest was seated? Detestable manners!

"Well, I said one or two things, the merest nonsense, on purpose to provoke her, intending to come on at once and have a little laugh."

"What things?"

"You mustn't press a husband too hard. I was speaking to my wife——"

"And my patient."

"And your patient, but, pardon me, I had ceased to regard Lady Camber as an invalid. I believed that you had restored her to vigorous health."

"What things did you say?"

"I was foolish, I admit it, but the provocation was great. I said one or two things which may have led her to believe that a mild flirtation was going on between Nurse Yorke and myself."

"Good God!"

At once our paladin stiffened, the geniality went out of his voice.

"I venture to remind you, Mr. Napier, that I was speaking privately with my wife."

"Through a public telephone."

"As you say, and therefore a man of your intelligence might well infer that nothing unseemly was said. Had I suspected that my wife would not have guessed that I had found her out and was merely teasing her, you may be sure that I should not have ventured on the joke at all."

Napier glanced at Esther. His frown deepened as he perceived in her a curious and quite unaccountable acquiescence in this amazing story. He said sharply: "Lord Camber seems to overlook the fact that this little joke of his has seriously compromised you."

Harry answered hastily—"I did overlook that. I'm heartily ashamed of myself. Can a man say more?"

"Please finish the story."

"She kept it up to the last. I swear that if you had been at my end of the telephone you would have thought that she was much amused."

This, as we know, was true, and a happy touch on the part of our paladin.

"And then——?"

"I came on to enjoy a good laugh. Picture my dismay when my wife, after virtually admitting that she had joined in the joke by asking me, in Nurse Yorke's presence, whether anyone had sent for me, suddenly sprang to her feet, and insulted first myself and then Nurse Yorke, who was in absolute ignorance of what had passed."

"But you explained?"

"I hadn't time. She behaved like a madwoman. She dared to ask Nurse Yorke if I was anything to her?"

"And you replied, nurse?"

"I replied that he was absolutely—nothing."

For the first time Esther answered with vehemence.

"And that is all, Lord Camber?"

"That is all. I presume that Peach was present when my wife telephoned me. What mischief she made, I can't tell. It seems that she had been furiously jealous of Nurse Yorke."

Napier nodded. It was impossible to determine, from his expression, whether or not he believed Harry's story. He said frigidly, "Have I your permission to explain this little joke to your wife?"

"By all means, unless you allow me——"

Napier held up his hand.

"I can't allow you to see her at all for a few days. I will let you know as soon as she recovers consciousness. Meantime, it might be as well not to leave town."

Some of the paladin's too florid colour faded.

"You don't mean," he said, pausing and turning frightened eyes upon Napier, "that there is any—danger?"

"Yes," Napier replied. "I mean that Lady Camber's life hangs by a thread."

The paladin rose.

"I shall stay at home," he said. "I had no idea—I——"

He went out of the room, shaken and confounded. The door had hardly closed when Napier said to Esther:

"Have you anything to add to Lord Camber's story?"

"Nothing."

She spoke in a tone he had never heard from her before.

"You are quite sure?"

She made an effort to rouse herself.

"When I left the laboratory and went upstairs, Lady Camber was on the sofa. She told me that she had not moved. I noticed nothing odd in her manner, nothing at all. She had, perhaps, rather more colour than usual. Then Lord Camber came in. The rest is as he described it. My patient's attack on me, so violent, so unexpected, overwhelmed me."

He saw that she was dazed and began to pity her. But tempering his pity was the intuition that the truth had not been told, and that this woman knew it. And this filled him with indignation. The supreme importance of knowing everything at such a moment, coupled with the sense that he was groping in the dark,

irritated him beyond endurance. He told himself that he could not accept the husband's story. It was too thin. Had he not studied his patient in her many moods for six weeks? And from the first he had perceived that she was no fool. Hysterical, emotional, lacking in self-control—yes, but of quick perceptions, shrewd, and affectionate. That such a woman, upon so slight a pretext, should go to pieces—this was incredible.

He took up one of the many speaking tubes near his desk. Esther heard him ask Nurse Richards if there was any change. She saw that he frowned as he listened to her reply. His quick response followed —"I'll come at once." He laid down the tube and looked at Esther. "What is the matter?"

"I am puzzled, bewildered. If you can give me something to do, anything to distract me, it will be a kindness."

"The laboratory is in an awful mess."

"I'll put things straight."

"If I want anything, I'll speak to you through the tube. Send it up at once."

"Very good."

He examined her intently, and beneath his steadfast gaze a slight colour flowed into her pale cheeks.

"I think you ought to lie down and rest."

"No, no—I couldn't! Anything but that."

He nodded and walked to the door. Upon the threshold he turned and came back. Probably he was unaware of any harshness either in his voice or look, being engrossed, obsessed, in his quest of a so-

lution to a problem to which she might be withholding the key.

"Under the circumstances I must relieve you of any further responsibility in this case?"

"Can I return to my friend, Miss Jagg?"

He remarked a note of eagerness in her voice. Why should she be in such a hurry to leave the house?

"No," he answered decidedly. "To-morrow, perhaps. We will see."

He went out.

Esther stood in the centre of the room, knowing that her debt to Harry had been paid. The only man whose good opinion she prized, the man whom she loved, distrusted her and had not scrupled to show that distrust plainly. He knew—was it conceivable that he should not know?—what her silence must mean—a deliberate attempt to keep him in abhorred darkness. As nurse she had committed the unpardonable sin.

With a heavy sigh she went into the laboratory, the scene of their joint labours, the place wherein she had found romance. Mechanically, she began to arrange things. Every familiar object he had touched. How keen, how unwearied he had been in his search for those subtile, elusive essences which might assuage human suffering. Again and again she had observed the signs of fatigue; the frail body driven to exhaustion by the indomitable will. Would such a man, unsparing of himself in the prosecution of what he had deemed duty, spare her?

She worked swiftly, putting each object into its place. She would never work here again, whether that

poor creature upstairs lived or died. If Alice lived she would speak, and Napier would discover how grossly he had been deceived. If she died, it was as inevitable that the doctor, robbed of a great triumph, must for ever associate the nurse with disaster. He would hate the very sight of her.

Silently she bade farewell to this whitewashed workshop, so unfragrant, so lacking in those accessories commonly supposed to form part of love's background. Like many a peri before her, she never appreciated her paradise, or recognised it as such, till she was about to leave it.

From the speaking tube came a faint whistle. She ran into the library and put it to her ear.

"Send up a tincture of digitalis."

Napier kept certain drugs in a mahogany cabinet in the laboratory. It opened like a safe, and Esther knew the combination. But, she had some difficulty in finding the digitalis. Napier was untidy, and, when in a hurry, careless of replacing things. Almost the first object she beheld was the famous alkaloid, Talin, so identified in her mind with their joint labours. Napier, she remembered, had accorded the tiny phial the place of honour in the centre of the cabinet. And it had not been touched since then because he would not use it, or permit its use by others, until he discovered the equally subtile reagent which would reveal its presence in the human system.

For an instant, she stared at the colourless, odourless fluid. Then she searched for the digitalis and found it. A few minutes had passed before she handed

the tincture to Buckle with instructions to take it upstairs immediately.

She went back to the open cabinet. The sight of the Talin allured her. Years ago she had said with a gay laugh that she would throw herself into the Thames rather than submit to the drudgery of earning a few pounds a year as companion to Mrs. Rockingham Trigg's aged aunt. More than once, since then, she had thought of the river as a sanctuary for a girl too hardly pressed; and always, with a shudder of terror she had remembered that it takes three minutes to drown.

She stared at the Talin.

So her father had looked at the weapon in his desk. And the same deadly weariness which had assailed Douglas Yorke now fastened itself upon his daughter. Life terrified her. While she stood there, trembling, a mist seemed to obscure her faculties. Lost in a wilderness, with nothing to remind her of the past but a mirage growing faint upon a distant horizon, she forgot her own name, where she was, what she had been. Was madness coming once more upon her? Knowing that Napier might return at any minute, she stretched out her hand and clutched the phial of Talin, hiding it in her bosom. This act was almost unconscious, but the mere movement, the grip of a concrete object, restored her quivering mind to its balance. Hastily she closed the cabinet and went back to work.

Presently, Napier came in.

"She has not spoken?"

"No."

His reluctance to discuss the case, contrasted with his former confidence, became the measure of the gulf now steadily widening between them. He glanced at the long deal table.

"You have worked hard?"

"Yes."

"You spoke of your friend, Miss Jagg. Go and see her! It will do you good. It's cold but fine. I insist!"

Trying to read him, she wondered whether this was a hint that on the morrow she must expect dismissal. Too tired to question his authority she obeyed listlessly. She would like to see Miranda once more.

Outside, there was a nip of frost in the air, the feeling as if snow were coming. From some of the big establishments in Oxford Street shop girls were streaming out for the midday meal, chattering and laughing, chaffing each other, somewhat to the disapproval of the tall, stiff, frock-coated young men, who prided themselves upon deportment. Only the very young girls laughed; the elder women walked sedately, glancing neither to right nor left, intent upon their own thoughts which, like their faces, were evidently of a dull complexion. Close to the edge of the pavement, marched a file of sandwichmen carrying upon their bent backs an enormous letter, part of the name of a popular farce. The dismal procession moved slowly along; purple letters flared out of yellow boards. The imperial colours arrested Esther's eyes, challenging contrast with the pinched faces of the men, their hardly decent rags, their boots worn out by endless trampings. And these poor waifs, the derelicts of the streets, were

sent forth to proclaim—what? Failure and disaster? No. Success! They invited no pity for themselves. But all foot-passengers were reminded that the most screaming farce of the decade was still running, although sandwichmen might crawl.

Esther saw that colour blazed everywhere except upon the cheeks of the men and women. The motor 'buses roared by: dazzling streaks of red and blue and green. The flags of England and America floated above the towering buildings. The Stars and Stripes! How significant a symbol of a huge nation of workers. Above, the sun shone dimly out of a sky of palest azure fading into opalescent haze. It diffused primrose light, distinctively autumnal, bringing to mind the ardours of summer while suggesting the coming rigours of winter.

Crossing Oxford Street, Esther narrowly escaped being run over by a splendid six-cylinder Napier, which, grazing her gown, rushed onward, purring contentedly. This soft purr, almost bestial in its inhuman self-satisfaction, vibrated through Esther's brain: the gloating, enraptured, discreetly modulated note of a triumphant civilisation which adored things at the expense of persons. "Get out of my way, or perish!" it seemed to say.

Esther had not seen Miranda for a few days. And at the top of the stairs she found a notice setting forth Miss Jagg's inability to receive her pupils. Then Miranda must be ill, in bed. Esther ascended the second flight of stairs and tapped at the door of Miranda's bedroom.

"Come in!"

Her old friend was alone.

Esther's trained eye at once perceived the absence of those innumerable little ministrations which make so much difference to the comfort of bedridden persons. No doubt the typewriting young lady did her best, a thin layer of attentions sandwiched between long hours of work.

"Rheumatism?" said Esther.

"Yes," said Miranda shortly.

Esther gazed at her in stupefaction. The poor old woman's face was seared with pain, and at last age seemed to have gripped her relentlessly, strangling vitality and joyousness. At Esther's expression she tried to smile, tried dismally and failed. And when she spoke her soft kind voice had hardened.

"I've had four days, and four nights—ah!—those nights!—of bad pain."

"Why didn't you send for me?"

"You were busy. And I detest hard-luck stories, and whiners and wailers. I've been whining and wailing. Yes—I have. And it never does any good, does it?"

She looked so fierce that Esther hardly dared to kiss her.

"The Academy will go to pot," she added grimly. "The doctor says that this means weeks upon my back."

"I can come to you to-morrow," said Esther.

She had forgotten everything save the one tremendous fact that a friend needed her. And for the hundredth time, pity and sympathy for others touched with

gentle, healing fingers her own bruised and lacerated tissues.

"I forbid you to come," said Miranda. Then she burst out with a dramatic intensity which revealed all that she had valiantly suppressed during five and twenty years: "It's the beginning of the end, and the sooner the end comes the better. If I could hasten it, if——"

"No, no!" cried Esther.

"I say yes. Life is too hard for women who fight for their own hand. We fight against Nature, who never forgives, never! I have lain here alone thinking of Sabrina, and myself, and others, who have fought gamely to the last gasp. But they've had to turn their faces to the wall. We were intended to be protected and loved when we get old and feeble, and to die, when our time comes, with children about us. Before it is too late, Esther, see to it that you have children, as I might have had if I'd not been a fool. Make this doctor marry you. Make him, I say! Use your weapons before they rust. I tell you I've thought it out to the everlasting rattle of those typewriting machines downstairs. What do those girls earn? Hardly enough to keep body and soul together. Can they save a farthing? No. And they're giving to their machines what should be given to their husbands and children."

"We can't all marry," said Esther feebly, overwhelmed by the passion in her friend's voice.

"I know that. We outnumber the men; but I'm not such a fool as to be talking of those who can't marry,

but of those who can, of women like yourself and that kind, pretty little simpleton who sleeps here, and who prides herself, as you did and do, upon earning her own living. And in ten years her chance will be gone for ever. I told her so this morning."

"Where is your brother?"

"In America. You are not to go to Laura, do you understand?"

"If I did go, I should want to throw vitriol at her."

"It's not money I want. I've enough to see me through without charity. The pupils talk of a benefit. I won't have it, if I never earn another penny."

"I shall come to-morrow," said Esther.

"Throw up your job? Pish!"

"It's thrown me up."

"What do you say?"

Esther hesitated. Pride constrained her to silence, instinct told her that the recital of her suffering would assuage Miranda's pangs. Instinct conquered pride. She told her story simply, almost impassively, with an indifference which concealed nothing.

"You poor child!"

"It will do me good to look after you."

And then during a long silence each woman, driven from all consideration of self, thought absorbedly of the other. But Esther had kept back one incident. Miranda did not know what lay upon her friend's breast, the tiny phial which held swift and painless oblivion.

CHAPTER XXVI

DE PROFUNDIS

As soon as Esther returned to Harley Street, Buckle told her that Napier wished to see her in the library. She obeyed in trepidation, convinced that Alice must have spoken, although she had learned from the butler that no marked change had taken place. To her amazement, Napier said awkwardly, "I treated you with rudeness this morning. Please forgive me. I was and am still horribly worried. Lord Camber is keeping something back. His story, on the face of it, is flimsy, quite inadequate to account for this relapse. But from beginning to end you have behaved splendidly. And I let you go without even a word of thanks. I am so sorry."

"Anyone could see how worried you were."

"You don't think I hold you responsible for what has happened?"

His tone, rather than the words, upset her. And his glance kindly, trustful, sympathetic, brought a flicker of colour to her cheeks.

"I didn't know. I—I thought from your manner——"

"My manner, when I'm on edge, is detestable. I behave like a machine. Well, you have turned me from a machine into a man. My work used to be everything. Now something infinitely better has taken its place."

She stared at him, realising what was coming, and knowing, too, how it had come about, the swift precipitation of love being held in solution and now indestructibly solid.

"When you went away three hours ago, I knew that you had misunderstood me and my feelings for you. Are you ill, Miss Yorke?"

"I feel rather dizzy," Esther confessed.

He fetched a chair.

"I've been too hasty," he said, as she sank into it. "I feel a clown, but I had to let you have a glimpse of my heart."

He waited anxiously for a word of encouragement, while Esther was torn in two between her pledge to Harry and her desire to fling herself into the arms outstretched towards her. Struggling against opposing currents, she clutched at the straw of procrastination, divining that he would wait patiently.

"Please say nothing more now," she faltered.

It was impossible to let him speak, without telling him in return the story of her life, and this, in truth, she was physically incapable of doing. His unshaken confidence had shaken her. Perhaps, the one overmastering emotion was the desire to replace the phial of Talin, and the sense that in taking it she had held not only herself but this man too cheap. Then she heard Napier speaking with professional incisiveness.

"You are still in my employment, and I shall insist upon obedience. Go to your room, and straight to bed! I'll see that a proper dinner is sent up."

"I'd sooner stop in the laboratory."

"In the laboratory? Why?"

"There was plenty to do when I left."

"I've been at work there. All is in apple pie order. Off you go!"

"If I may stay here and read?"

"Take any book you like, and read it in bed. You are worn out."

Very slowly she moved towards the door, reflecting how great the odds were against his discovering that one phial out of a hundred was missing. On the morrow she would replace it. As she reached the door she turned.

"Is Lady Camber easier?"

"There is no change."

"If I can do anything——?"

"You can go to bed. Good-night."

"Good-night."

When she had gone he sat down at his desk, half-smiling, half-frowning, a prey to bitter-sweet reflections, from which he was aroused by Buckle.

"Mrs. Peach wishes to see you, sir."

"Bother Mrs. Peach!"

The old servant smiled discreetly.

"She asked me to add, sir, that it was on a matter of importance."

"Show her in."

Peach came in a minute later, exhibiting a tearstained face and much discomposure, perceptibly increased by the coldly critical stare with which Napier greeted her.

"Well?" He rapped out the curt monosyllable, anticipating an impassioned and tearful request to be

allowed to wait on her mistress. Peach stood in front of the desk, with the light from the lamp full upon her agitated countenance.

"Beg pardon, sir, but I should mention that jealousy has always been my besetting sin."

"Go on!"

"It's on my mind and conscience that I'm partly, only partly, the cause of this trouble."

"Please get to the point."

His manner dried the old woman's tears. With savage malice she said meaningly:

"Nurse Yorke has just been 'ere."

"Yes."

"Didn't say nothink, did she, about this morning?" As Napier repudiated the question with an impatient gesture, she continued with increased acrimony: "When this Nurse Yorke came between me and my lady, I saw that she was an 'ussy at once."

"Be very careful!"

"She's an 'ussy, a wrong 'un! She's been carrying on shameful with my lord, and so, this morning, believin' my lady to be quite herself again, I gave her, so to speak, a gentle 'int."

In her excitement the h's began to fall freely.

"A gentle hint? What did you say?"

"I told my lady that my lord was meeting this young woman on the sly."

"You dared to tell that lie?"

"Oh, ho! Lie, is it?"

"Nurse Yorke is incapable of meeting Lord Camber, or anybody else, on the sly."

"Reely! Suppose I told you that this very morning as ever was my lord tried to bribe me, and thought he'd succeeded, too."

She chuckled maliciously, glaring at Napier out of her small, closely set eyes.

"Tried to bribe you? Impossible."

"Do you think he offered me a quid? My lord offered me a pension."

"A pension?"

Napier leaned forward, distrusting his ears, but not his eyes. Peach's face was illumined by an unmistakable sincerity.

"Yes—a pension. And—and—it was just about too much for me. I'm getting old, and I've nothink laid by. See! And if my lady died, where would I be? In the porehouse—eh? So I've said nothink all day, but I carn't go to bed with this on my chest."

"I beg your pardon," said Napier gravely. "All the same, you are mistaken about Nurse Yorke. Lord Camber may have paid her some attention. She's an attractive young lady. But how do you know that his attentions were not repulsed?"

"'Ow old do yer think I am? I'm nearly sixty, and I've lived my life in London, wickedest city in the world."

"Come, come, this is not evidence."

"I saw 'er slink out to meet him at seven at night under the Bentinck statoo in Cavendish Square. My lord had a four-wheeler waiting. I saw 'em drive off together; and I saw 'er come back at ten. That's what I saw with my own eyes a week ago, and not a word

did I breathe to a soul till I told my lady this morning. And then——"

"And then?"

"She went wild. And she wanted to 'ave it out there and then. So she telephoned to my lord in Nurse Yorke's name. Rare mimic she is! And what he said at the other end just finished her."

"And how do you know what he said?"

"My lady, pore dear, repeated 'is words out loud. I'd told 'er that they was correspondin', and that I'd seen a letter from my lord to Nurse Yorke lying on the 'all table. My lady asked my lord about that letter. And then 'e said, for she repeated it, out loud: 'What's your answer'? And my lady said she couldn't give it, not through a telephone; and then my lord answered that he wouldn't have written the letter unless he'd known what the answer was a-going to be. And then he wound up by callin' her 'is darling, and beggin' for a kiss."

Napier sat staring at her. With an effort, he said slowly:

"If it were a practical joke? If Lord Camber guessed that his wife was playing a trick on him, and played a trick on her?"

But, as he put the question, he knew the fatuity of it.

"A joke?" Peach repeated the word derisively. "And what about the meetin'? What about the letter? What about tryin' to bribe me? I've lost a quid a week for the rest of my life, but I'll have my sleep at nights."

"I'm sorry I spoke harshly to you. Will you leave this in my hands?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. You can go now."

"I've this much more to say. It's my belief them two have been thick as thieves before."

She went out, leaving Napier confounded by her last words and what they signified. Camber and Esther had met before. Then, very slowly and carefully, he began to go back, to recall what he knew of Esther. He remembered the first meeting in Piccadilly Circus, the piteous expression of her face, his surprise at finding such a girl in such a place at such a time, a surprise inordinately increased when he discovered where she lived.

And Camber? Sir Bedford had nothing but good to say of Camber. Once he had paid attention to a girl in Palace Gardens.

Palace Gardens?

That was the address given by Esther, when he helped her into a hansom.

Napier groaned. If Camber had ever loved Esther, the affair took the form of a detestable conspiracy against his patient. He looked at his watch. It was time to see her. He hurried upstairs to find Alice slightly worse, the action of the heart being uneven.

He administered another dose of digitalis, and returned to the library. His thoughts flew to Esther and the hours spent with her in the laboratory, when they had worked side by side. Inevitably his mind dwelt upon the isolation of Talin, and, as inevitably,

it struck him that a great emergency would justify its use at this critical moment. In minute doses, it was likely to be a cardiac tonic of extraordinary virtue. Taken in excess, it would depress the heart's action to a very dangerous extent.

He went to the cabinet and opened it. The Talin was missing.

At first this made no impression. Absent-minded about trifles, it was possible that he himself had moved the phial. He ransacked the cabinet. The drug was not there.

Only one other person had access to the laboratory. Only Esther knew the combination of letters which opened the cabinet. Esther must have taken it.

Why?

Carefully closing the doors of cabinet and laboratory, he sat down to think. Presently he rang the bell, and when Buckle came in, said in a voice from which all feeling had vanished:

"If Nurse Yorke has not gone to bed, I should like to see her."

He waited a few minutes. Esther, possibly, had taken the Talin for the purpose of resuming the experiments in search of a reagent. She might have left the phial in some drawer in the laboratory, a breach of discipline he would gladly condone.

She came in quietly.

"You had not gone to bed?"

"No, I couldn't."

"I sent for you," he said, "because I was thinking of trying an experiment. Risks must be run. Lady

Camber's condition becomes hourly more critical. Under the circumstances should I be justified in trying a minute dose of Talin?"

He saw something in her eyes which he recognised as fear. But her voice was as quiet as his, when she repeated the last word.

"Talin?"

"Yes; Talin. Why not?"

He paused, giving her the chance to speak, to explain. Esther said nothing, the colour went out of her lips, the pupils of her eyes dilated.

"I shall go upstairs again. Will you stay here till I come back?"

"Of course."

It seemed to him that relief positively shone out of her eyes.

"When I come back I shall decide definitely about the Talin. Meanwhile, if I want anything I'll speak to you through the tube."

"I'll stay here till you come back."

Still looking at her, he made a last attempt to win her confidence.

"Is there anything on your mind? What is it?"

She did not withdraw her eyes from his, but in their depths he read a piteous supplication to forbear, to ask no further questions.

"Let me share your trouble, whatever it is."

"You can't, Mr. Napier."

"You have nothing to say?"

With a hunted look she murmured: "Nothing."

He went quickly out. As the door closed she turned

her head to listen for his retreating footsteps. Then, very swiftly, she opened the laboratory door, switched on the lights, and replaced the phial. When Napier returned, ten minutes afterwards, he found her reading. She rose to receive him. With a gesture he seemed to signify that the formal, official relation hitherto existing between doctor and nurse had now come to an end.

"How is she?"

He perceived that her manner was easier; and a grateful light seemed to diffuse her eyes. And, indeed, she was passionately grateful to Napier, whose unexpected kindness had expanded into something she hardly dared to analyse or measure, and to Him, who had tempered the wind at the supreme moment when the storm distracted her poor wits to the darkness and chaos of despair.

He answered, "No better, but I shall not try the Talin."

Her face expressed indifference. He continued, "That is all. Will you promise me to go to bed?"

"Yes."

Alone, he hestitated for one moment. Then he opened the safe and saw the replaced phial. He came back into the library, holding it in his hand, staring at it with the same tense look of interrogation so admirably rendered by the artist. He held it up to the light. He consulted a notebook. There ought to be two drachms and twenty-seven minims of the alkaloid. With feverish impatience he went back into the laboratory and measured the fluid. His features relaxed as

he made certain that the phial still contained the exact quantity entered in his notebook. But such evidence was inconclusive. A part of the alkaloid might have been taken and replaced with water. To determine this accurately meant a qualitative analysis of very great delicacy, a task of several hours. He returned to the library and sat down.

Why had she taken the Talin?

Gropingly he stretched out towards some reasonable hypothesis. Evidently there had been love passages between Camber and her, broken off, no doubt, by the father's death and dishonour. After that years of poverty and suffering writ large upon her face. And this writing was unmistakable, the record that never deceives him who has eyes to read and heart and mind to comprehend. It seemed plain that she must have loved Camber faithfully. Others, like himself, had desired to lift the burden of a self-imposed celibacy. But because she loved Camber these had been sent away. And Camber was just the man to inspire a passion of devotion. A sort of Bayard, as that ass Slufter had said. He compared the paladin's magnificent body with his own insignificant appearance, but the consoling thought came, "I should have married her, but he didn't." Naturally, he took for granted that the man had shrunk from marriage with Douglas Yorke's daughter. In that, as we know, he did our Harry injustice; but, essentially, he grasped the truth. In Harry's place he would have married Esther, without marking time, and without any consideration for dear little Mumsies.

Up to this point Napier had moved slowly and surely. The lovers had been driven apart by circumstance; the maid remained a maid, the man married a pretty, clever mimic, who—admittedly—had been unable to play the part of great lady. Then, in this very room, after many years, the lovers had met again. And Esther had consented to nurse the woman who had supplanted her.

The lines deepened upon Napier's forehead. As a psychologist, he told himself that it was difficult to reconcile his knowledge of Esther's character and temperament with Esther's conduct. He recalled the scene between himself and her. After the first meeting with Camber she had withdrawn from her engagement to nurse the wife. And then, at his solicitation, against her own judgment, she had undertaken the task.

Why had she not told the truth? Why had she not divined the risk to her patient, if the truth had become known later?

He went a step further. The nursing had been done admirably, with a tact and patience which surpassed expectation. And then husband and maid appeared, and from that moment the exquisite stitching had been unpicked.

He considered the secret meeting, the letter, and the discovery by Lady Camber of both. Lastly, that black attempt to bribe Peach. If Lady Camber died without regaining consciousness, and if Peach had held her tongue, the secret history of the past twenty-four hours would have remained secret for ever. But Peach had spoken, and speech meant the loss of so much that

none could question the essential truth of her story.

If Lady Camber lived, Esther's reputation was at the mercy of a jealous woman. If she died, Camber could marry Esther and give her everything a woman holds dear.

Suspending judgment, he presented the case as it might be presented to a jury, and the deduction horrified him. He recalled Camber's face in the glass opposite, when he was assured that his wife would live, and the same expression seen upon Esther's face only a few hours later. The husband had hoped that death would remove the only barrier between himself and the woman he loved. And, with the realisation that his wife was likely to live, he had plunged into an intrigue with Esther, and—possibly—dragged her into it. Whether or not that intrigue was innocent, the consequence had been disastrous to his patient.

Why had Esther taken the Talin? Only two reasons remained adequate. Driven to despair by consequences which she might or might not have been culpable in bringing about, Esther had seen in this unknown, untraceable drug a swift and sure means of escape from a life no longer worth living.

Or—the other reason remained—to be dismissed with a shudder of execration.

He considered the first reason. Having taken the Talin, why did she not use it? What had stayed her hand? She must have seized opportunity by the skirts when he left her alone in the laboratory. Had she subtracted a small quantity, replacing it with water?

At this moment, alone, she might—appalling thought—be about to take the awful leap!

He rose, to pace the room with long, unsteady strides. He could not go to her. And if he did, what could he say?

He might write a line, a few words. He did so, without further thought or speculation, taking them hot from his heart:

I want you to know that I trust you. You are in great distress, and physically weak as well. But I am your friend through thick and thin. Believe that! Your weakness is the inevitable result of a too generous service. To all hard workers come black moments, and that is the time to think of the light, the Light which burns eternally, whether we see it or not.

He went upstairs; he tapped upon Esther's door, and experienced an overwhelming sense of relief when he heard her voice upon the other side, saying quietly, "Who is it?" He answered, "It is I, Napier; I have a note for you."

The door opened a few inches and her hand appeared. Napier slipped the note into her hand, and then, with an uncontrollable impulse, held the hand and kissed it. This kiss was the pledge and seal of his belief in her. He heard a soft whisper as the hand vanished:

"Thank you for that."

He hastened from one woman to the other, and he could not have done this had not his belief in Esther's innocence been fundamental. For one instant he had suspected her of an execrable crime.

For one instant—no longer. And he felt a cur, when he thought of it. Probably she loved Camber, and, for his sake, at his irresistible solicitation, had consented to see him secretly. Camber, not she, was responsible for the mischief that had been wrought. And she, unable to betray the man she loved, had contemplated self-destruction. He knew that he was staring into thickest fog, and when he kissed Esther's hand he knew also that the fog would lift, and that he would see clearly this dear woman as she was—tender, kind, unselfish, and the stronger inasmuch as she had fought against her own weakness and had prevailed.

As he entered Lady Camber's room the night nurse held a finger to her lips. She whispered that her patient was quieter. Napier approached the bed. The light was dim, but quite strong enough to reveal to his more experienced eye the true nature of this apparent improvement. He laid his finger upon the wrist, and then turned back the eyelid.

"She is sinking," he said half an hour later, after a long and fruitless attempt to stimulate the action of the heart. "Go downstairs and tell Buckle to fetch Lord Camber. Let nobody else in the house be disturbed. I will stay here."

He sat down, cheek upon hand, steadfastly regarding the pretty face upon the pillow, watching the ebb of the life he had desired so ardently to save. Many lives had thus evaded him, slipping through the fingers which had closed firmly about them. And nearly always he had been sensible of an intolerable revolt,

of a crushing realisation of human impotence. No such emotion stirred him now, only a profound pity. He saw her as she was, when her grace and beauty first began to captivate the town. What a delightful vision of youth and mirth and vitality! Euphrosyne incarnate!

And now she lay dying, because a paladin, sworn to cherish her, had broken his troth.

CHAPTER XXVII

AN IDEAL

For the last time we behold Sir Bedford Slufter ascending the steps of Napier's house. Upon his large, cleanly-shaved pink face we observe a decorous expression of resignation to the Divine will tempered by human sympathy and regret, and faintly illuminated, possibly, by the reflection that men might come and go, but fees remained. Buckle, who had enormous respect for the illustrious visitor, ushered him into the library.

"I'll tell Mr. Napier you are here, Sir Bedford."

Sir Bedford pulled a dark grey glove from his right hand.

"Buckle——"

"I beg pardon, Sir Bedford!"

"I am very much upset, my old friend, ve-ry much upset."

"We were all upset, Sir Bedford. My master, sir, looks ten years older this morning."

Sir Bedford sat down, and adjusted his gold pince-nez. When he spoke his voice had a rich, mellow tone, which somehow suggested to the bereaved that life, despite its sorrows and sufferings, was well worth the living.

"I have not felt so upset, Buckle, since that black Monday when my patient, the Hereditary Grand

Duchess of Blutemburg-Dankerstein, expired at the very moment when I was offering her my congratulations upon the improvement in her condition."

Buckle replied with extreme deference:

"Man and boy, sir, I've worked for fifty years within a hundred yards of Harley Street. It's not death upsets *us*, Sir Bedford. We see too much of that. It's—it's the unexpected."

"A very apposite remark."

Buckle bowed. And his voice had acquired something of the ripe richness of Sir Bedford's when he asked solemnly:

"Can I get you a glass of sherry, Sir Bedford?"

"No, no."

"It's the King's sherry, sir."

"Indeed? A fine wine, a ve-ry fine wine, but—no, *no*, not at ten in the morning! Tell your master I should like to have a word with him as reasonably soon as possible."

"Very good, Sir Bedford. I shall take the liberty of placing the sherry in the hall, Sir Bedford."

He went out, leaving the eminent physician to his own reflections, which soared into kings' palaces and thence descended through butlers' pantries into snug cellars where aged and royal wines awaited their appointed and glorious destiny.

"Bless my soul, you startled me."

Napier had entered. He looked very pale and thin, in striking contrast to the rubicund rotundity of his visitor. Sir Bedford, after the usual greeting, said soothingly:

"Come, come, my dear Napier, I must protest against your taking this blow so hard. You look as if you'd not slept a wink."

"I have been up all night."

"No man could have done more."

"My worries are not what you think. I'm concerned with the living more than the dead."

"Well, well, I shall make it my affair, Napier, that the world hears that this was not quite unexpected by —us."

"You are very kind." He spoke curtly, in a tone which caused Sir Bedford to open his slightly prominent eyes even wider than usual. "The truth is, the less the world hears of this case the better."

"Eh—what?"

Buckle came in.

"Lord Camber is here."

Sir Bedford murmured: "Shall I see him?"

Napier turned to Buckle.

"I will receive his lordship in a few minutes. By the way, I am expecting a memorandum from the Society of Clinical Research. Bring it in the moment it arrives."

As soon as the servant had gone, Sir Bedford said with agitation: "What did you mean, my dear Napier, by your most extraordinary remark just now?"

"Simply this: between ourselves, my unhappy patient has been done to death."

"Done to death? Good heavens!"

"By a man whom you and the rest of the world

regard as a sort of Bayard. I'm quite sure he thinks himself a Bayard."

"Done to death! What an expression!"

"I don't pick my words. Lord Camber is responsible for his wife's death."

"My dear Napier, my dear fellow, forgive me. I can make due allowance for your great disappointment, but 'done to death' is libellous. Frankly, you are morbid. I do not pretend to misunderstand you. You demanded from Camber what he was unable to supply: that passionate love which seldom survives the honeymoon of—of a *mésalliance*. Strictly *entre nous*, I admit, with reluctance, that this particular marriage was a disaster, which has ended—as I anticipated—with death. I state my profound conviction that the fittest has survived."

"If I were sure of that——!"

Sir Bedford held out his plump hand.

"I must be off, unless I can be of service. Banish morbid misgivings. And I entreat you as a friend to consider your own health. I have always done so, with the gratifying consciousness of being thereby the better able to minister to others."

"You are very kind."

"You are, I am told, almost a teetotaller. At such a time as this, a little stimulant, a glass of sound wine. Yes, yes, you take me. Good-bye, good-bye."

He bustled away, pursing up his too full lips and frowning. This young Napier was undeniably clever, but lacking in common-sense, and, assuredly, most indiscreet. *Done to death!* What an expression! Not

even his Majesty's sherry could take the taste of that out of his mouth.

As Sir Bedford sank back upon the cushions of his brougham, Napier was saying to Buckle:

"Go to Miss Yorke's room, and ask her to come here. When I ring twice—twice, you understand?—show Lord Camber in."

As Buckle disappeared, Napier went to the laboratory door and unlocked it. He glanced at the cabinet, hesitating. Then he altered the combination of the lock, and returned to his desk a few moments before Esther entered. They had met already, but in the presence of others. Esther, thanks to Napier's precautions, had not learned the news of Lady Camber's death till the morning. She appeared pale but composed.

"Did you sleep?" he asked.

"Yes—very soundly."

"That is well. Please sit down."

"Not till I have thanked you from the bottom of my heart for your letter. Oh! your consideration, your kindness——! And your trust in me——" She spoke brokenly. He made a warning gesture, but she continued: "You guessed that I was withholding something, something you ought to know. Mr. Napier, I was pledged to silence. I—I couldn't speak. But this death releases me. And now, I can speak."

"Not yet. Miss Yorke, are you strong enough to stand an ordeal?"

"An ordeal?"

"I can use no other word. If I could spare you I

would. If I could listen to your story first, how gladly I would do so! But I have a duty to perform, and it must be done regardless of my own feelings and regardless of yours."

"I have been very weak, but my strength has come back."

"It is necessary that I should put some questions to Lord Camber. As those questions concern you, they should be asked and answered in your presence."

She remained silent for an instant, then she said nervously: "I can't meet Lord Camber this morning. I—can't."

"But if I assure you, as your friend, that it is necessary, that you must meet him, what then?"

"I am in your hands."

He rang the bell twice.

Harry entered. It would be doing him injustice to affirm that of the three persons present he was the least distressed, but he bore himself from long habit with distinction. Summoned in the middle of the previous night, he had arrived greatly agitated, and after a short interview with Napier had returned to his own house knowing nothing except the bare fact that his wife had died without recovering consciousness. This one thought dried a few tears. A fearful scandal had been smothered. He did not sleep, obsessed by this tremendous conviction, which gradually became as poppy and mandragora, soothing deliciously fears and misgivings. Let us add that he thought very tenderly of poor Alice, and had achieved already a sense of detachment in regard to her which can only be de-

scribed as prodigious. His manner in greeting Esther and Napier was the pink of perfection. We must regret that Sir Bedford, so fine a judge, was not present. Harry's grave concern at Napier's pallid and worn appearance provoked a curt sentence.

"I've been at work, away from home, all night."

He indicated a chair, which Camber took. Esther sat near the paladin, her hands crossed upon her lap; her eyes upon the carpet. Camber glanced at her, trying to challenge attention, slightly disconcerted because she refused to look at him, and because Napier seemed so confoundedly preoccupied and impassive. Feeling that the ice must be broken, he took the first plunge.

"I blame myself terribly for what happened yesterday. I shall never forgive myself. I—I—— As you see, I can't talk about it."

"I must," said Napier. "The change for the worse in my patient began after your first visit, and day after day it became more acute. You promised to cooperate cordially with me, but you didn't."

The face that our paladin raised to meet Napier's glance was ingenuously open and candid. He perceived that the moment was ripe for a manly, straightforward presentation of a truth too long concealed.

"I promised more than I could perform," he replied with dignity. "I have not the effrontery to play the hypocrite. If my poor wife had lived, a separation would have been inevitable."

"You let her understand that?"

"Heavens! What sort of a brute do you take me for? I did my best, but I'm no actor."

"You acted yesterday."

"What do you mean?"

"And you are acting—now."

"This is going too far——"

"I am going as far as possible. You acted yesterday, and you are acting now, but your words and actions never imposed on me."

"You dare——"

"I know everything."

Our paladin turned a hunted glance upon Esther, silent and pale, staring at the pattern of the carpet.

"What have you told him?" he stammered.

"Miss Yorke has told me nothing. Peach came to me last night. You attempted to bribe her, Lord Camber."

"I did," he answered, not without spirit. "My wife, with that woman eavesdropping, had brought a monstrous charge against Miss Yorke."

"Monstrous?"

"Yes—monstrous. You can guess what was said by an intensely jealous woman in a moment of ungovernable passion."

"I can believe that such a charge was monstrous, but had you not seriously compromised Miss Yorke?"

"How?"

"By meeting her secretly. Peach saw you in Cavendish Square and told her mistress."

"Oh!" said Esther, in an agonised tone, "that is what killed her."

"No," Napier replied, "that is not what killed her."

"I asked for the interview," said Esther miserably. "It was my doing, not his."

"You must have had a strong reason?"

"I had."

Napier looked at Harry, flushed by the shock of Napier's words, but, on account of them, doubly anxious to rehabilitate himself. He expanded his chest, lifted his head, and spoke in the sonorous voice which had earned him reputation as an after-dinner orator. The defence of an innocent woman aroused all that was best in him.

"It is awful, terrible, that my poor wife should have heard of this meeting, but Miss Yorke and I are very old friends. If I have compromised her, I am ready to make amends. There was a time when I hoped she would become my wife. I am not ashamed to confess that she is and always has been the one woman in the world to me. This is not the moment to dwell on that; but you have forced me to this confession. Miss Yorke's reason for wishing to see me in private does not concern you, although I admit that our being spied upon by a malicious and unscrupulous woman has had most lamentable results."

"The results are what concern me," said Napier. "Did you take advantage of this interview to make it plain to Miss Yorke that your old friendship could not be renewed?"

"No," Harry replied sullenly.

"Am I right in supposing that Lady Camber knew

nothing of previous love passages between you and her nurse?"

"On account of her jealous disposition I did not mention them to her."

Napier turned to Esther, and his voice softened as he said: "I am quite sure that you saw the propriety of not renewing a friendship which might cause pain to your patient?"

"I did," said Esther, almost inaudibly.

"I do not press for an answer, but possibly that was the strong reason that animated you in asking for this interview?"

"Yes—it was."

"Thank you. But you, Lord Camber, refused to accept as final Miss Yorke's request?"

"I didn't want to lose a friend. I protest against this absurd inquisition. It is unnecessary and most painful to Miss Yorke. However bitterly one may regret what happened yesterday, it is impossible to shirk the conclusion that—er——"

"Things have turned out for the best, eh?"

"You put it with a singular lack of delicacy, but my unfortunate wife's death has ended a deal of trouble."

Napier's voice was very grim, as he replied: "The trouble is not ended, Lord Camber."

"What do you mean, sir?"

Napier picked up a piece of paper lying upon his desk. "This is a death certificate, which I have not signed yet."

The flush upon Harry's face deepened. Was this

man mad, as well as grossly impertinent? He felt the blood throbbing in his temples, as Napier continued: "Facts have come to my notice which many men in my position would deem it their duty to make public."

Harry broke in furiously: "What damned——"

"Silence!" Napier's voice electrified both man and woman. Esther put her hands to her face, apprehending that worse was to follow; Harry, for a paladin, looked extremely foolish. In his former tone, Napier continued: "Pray give me credit for wishing to avoid publicity as much as you do."

"I beg your pardon," said Harry.

As he spoke, Buckle entered with an envelope upon a salver, presented it to Napier, and retired. Napier laid it upon his desk, beside the certificate. Before he spoke again, he picked up a pen and began to twist it in his fingers, a trick familiar enough to Esther, and one indicating nervous strain.

"Because I wish to avoid publicity, Lord Camber, I am holding a private enquiry here and now. Yesterday, when I informed you of Lady Camber's critical condition, both you and Miss Yorke were aware that my patient had not spoken since her seizure."

"Well, sir?"

"You will admit that if Lady Camber was unable to give her version of what you had described as a little joke, and if Peach held her tongue, as you might reasonably believe she would, why, then, Miss Yorke and you would be relieved of any apprehension of a scandal. Bear that in mind! Now—have you ever heard of Talin?"

"Never."

Napier smiled faintly. Scientific England had acclaimed his discovery.

"It is a vegetable alkaloid which I isolated with Miss Yorke's assistance. Please give me your attention, Lord Camber."

But our paladin's eyes were fixed upon Esther's face. At the sudden mention of Talin, her quick wits jumped to the truth. Napier knew that she had taken the drug and replaced it. The shock was so great that she was seized with the old weakness and dizziness. Then, out of the gathering mists in her mind, she saw the eyes of Napier, kind and pitiful. With a tremendous effort she became calm. She understood what Napier meant when he emphasised the word "ordeal." And she knew also that her friend's imperative injunction to Camber was intended to save her confusion, to make him withdraw his amazed stare from her quivering face. Harry turned.

"I'm attending," he muttered.

"I shall be as untechnical as possible. Talin has the peculiar properties of stimulant narcotics. For instance, in very minute doses, it would act as a heart tonic. An overdose would produce coma and—death."

Again Camber glanced at Esther. But this time she valiantly confronted him with steady eyes.

"You don't dare to——"

Napier held up his hand.

"After you left I asked Miss Yorke to prepare a simple tincture. I left her alone in the laboratory

where the cabinet containing the Talin stands. She and I are the only persons in the kingdom who know the combination of letters which opens the cabinet. When I came back, Miss Yorke was at work setting my apparatus in order. The tincture had been sent up. Struck by her appearance of physical distress, I urged her to visit a friend. She did so, returning in the evening. I had instructed the butler to show her in here on arrival."

He paused, twisting the pen in his thin fingers. Harry had absorbed every word of the narrative. Napier's voice changed when it began again; it was softer, more sympathetic, no longer the voice of a prosecuting counsel, but rather that of an eloquent pleader for the defence. Esther noted the change, and understood it. Its subtlety was lost upon Harry, enthralled by the significance of Napier's words.

"I wanted to see Miss Yorke to apologise for an unintentional want of consideration. I did so. Then I begged her to go to bed. Obviously, she was worn out. To my surprise, she asked permission to work in the laboratory, to finish the tidying-up, which, it happened I had done myself. I insisted upon bed, and she went upstairs. Shortly afterwards, I conceived the idea of trying a minute dose of Talin upon my patient. The gradual failing of the heart's action was becoming very alarming. I opened the cabinet. The Talin was missing."

"My God!" exclaimed Harry.

Again Esther looked at him, and a faint derisive smile flickered across her face.

"I had reason to believe that the phial might be replaced. And it was replaced."

Harry sprang to his feet, his features convulsed and working, his voice harsh and broken.

"Not by—not by——?"

"By me," said Esther steadily.

"By—*you!*"

"Why did you take the Talin?" said Napier gently.

Esther hesitated. Almost inaudibly she answered: "To—to kill myself."

"Why should you wish to kill yourself?" demanded Harry. "Whatever happened you knew that I should stand by you."

"There were several reasons, but I'll give the greatest." Again she paused, and Napier saw that she was very deeply moved. Then she said, speaking in a whisper, but with clearest articulation: "I was not going to face starvation a second time."

"Starvation!" exclaimed Harry. "Starvation?" he repeated in a bewildered tone. "You had me."

"What made you change your mind?" asked Napier, leaning forward.

For the first time his voice betrayed eagerness and curiosity, but his eyes remained kind and sympathetic. Esther's features hardened as she heard Harry repeat the question in an autocratic tone:

"Exactly! What made you change your mind?"

She ignored him, meeting Napier's questioning glance with dignity. But her voice—low, pleading, broken by emotion—indicated neither guilt nor innocence, only distress.

"The temptation to take it came suddenly. You might return at any moment. I was dismissed from the case; and it seemed a last chance, a chance I snatched at. Then I went to see my old friend Miranda Jagg. I found her in bed, in great pain. And then——"

"Yes?"

"I—I saw that I was w-w-wanted, that there was something to do, w-w-work which m-must be done."

The faltering, stammering utterance touched Napier to a profounder pity than he had yet experienced. Far otherwise did this halting, seemingly inadequate explanation affect our paladin. The passionate surprise and distress which had flamed in his face vanished, leaving his handsome features dull and stolid. That *his* claims should be ignored and Miranda's acknowledged at such a moment appeared preposterous. The accretions of conceit, ever increasing since the famous century at Lord's, the insidious habit of self-indulgence which blinds its victims to self-denial in others, and, lastly, an inherited incapacity to consider anything or anybody from a point of view other than his own—these hounded him headlong to the conviction that a more sinister motive had driven Esther to take the Talin. The unhappy creature, distracted by the fear of discovery and unable to trust the man she loved and who loved her, had yielded to an abominable temptation. She had taken the Talin, but—thank God—she had not used it. Want of trust! That accounted for so much in their lives. She had not trusted him when her father died, she had not

trusted him at Mont Plaisir; she had not trusted him in this supreme moment.

It is pathetic and humorous to reflect that had another—let us say, Dorothea—pointed out the high opportunity of protecting a damsel in peril, and of chivalrously accepting her story without comment, our Harry would have grasped it. Such imagination as he possessed would have reeled at the vision of himself in the world's lists, challenging all the champions of Christendom on behalf of his liege lady, an Ivanhoe ardent to risk life and honour for a despised and outcast Rebecca.

Napier said quietly: "And so you replaced the Talin, hoping I should not discover that it had been taken?"

"Yes." After a pause she said impulsively: "And you believe me, you are still my friend?"

"I should be no friend," he replied gravely, "if I tried to make light of the terrible situation in which you have placed yourself, and Lord Camber, and me."

Harry raised his head.

"What are you saying? What have I to do with this?"

Napier met his glance.

"If the facts are made public, some suspicion will attach itself to—you."

"Are you stark, staring mad?"

Esther and Harry rose together. Esther was evidently confounded by Napier's words. Napier rose, too, throwing down the pen which he had been twisting in his fingers. His preparations were complete.

Nothing remained now but to operate, to expose, as swiftly and cleanly as possible, this man's soul, if he had one.

"I wish to make plain how this case may appear to others." He turned to Harry. "The charts are evidence that my patient's health steadily improved till you appeared. You have admitted to me—and doubtless to others—that your marriage was a blunder. It would be recalled that long ago you loved Miss Yorke and wished to marry her. If Lady Camber had recovered consciousness, a terrible scandal was inevitable. Is it possible you don't realise where you stand?"

The question need not have been asked. Harry, since a child, had never failed to see what others were kind enough to point out. He beheld himself, the most conspicuous figure in an august assembly, about to be tried by his peers, with a rope of silk dangling above his head.

Utterly confounded and upset, he almost screamed out: "Before God, I swear that——"

"Lord Camber," Napier's voice was icy, "this is so unnecessary. I am not your judge."

"Judge!" He wiped his forehead. "I ask again—why should I be brought into this?"

"Motive is everything in such cases. Miss Yorke's motive for taking the Talin is a credible one."

Harry answered violently, seeing himself pilloried, hearing his illustrious name defamed by newsboys:

"Of course it is credible. Why do you question it?"

"Personally, I do not question it."

"Then what are we at? What is the meaning of this sort of inquisition, this harrowing up of Miss Yorke's feelings and mine?"

"I'll answer you. I know the exact quantity of Talin that was in the phial. I cannot sign the certificate till it has been demonstrated that the Talin has not been touched. I spent last night with a friend in the laboratory of the Society for Clinical Research. The analysis was a delicate and tedious business. When I left this morning, the results were not yet summed up."

"But you accept Miss Yorke's explanation?"

"I do."

Harry stared at him. A reason, which justified a private inquiry, faintly illumined a befogged mind. This doctor, with a reputation at stake, admitted that he shrank from publicity. Impetuously he blurted out:

"Mr. Napier, sign that certificate. Sign it! Prove your faith in Miss Yorke, clear her of this damnable suspicion by signing it at once."

"And what would *you* do to prove your faith in Miss Yorke's innocence?"

"Anything—anything." He blundered on like an elephant in a morass. "I'm a rich man, I'd give half my fortune to save—her."

Napier smiled.

"Are you trying to bribe me, Lord Camber?"

"No, no; can't you see I'm distracted with misery? I'm not thinking of myself at all, only of her."

A rough sincerity emphasised the words. For the first time during the interview Napier considered the

possibility of having been mistaken in his estimate of Harry's true character. He addressed Esther:

"I must have a few words in private with Lord Camber. Will you go into the laboratory?"

"If you wish it."

He accompanied her to the door, opening it. As she passed through she met Napier's eyes, still steadfastly kind. He had his back to Harry, and Esther caught the whisper, "Courage!" Although she was perplexed, troubled indeed beyond expression, by Napier's methods, one fact stood out above all obscurities. His trust had never failed. She held her head higher as she entered the bare, whitewashed room, and a faint smile parted her lips.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE PALADIN BEHOLDS HIMSELF AS HE IS

NAPIER returned to his desk. Nor did he speak immediately. Camber's attitude indicated unconditional surrender and deflation. And Esther had witnessed this attenuation of a once "splendid specimen of manhood." She saw him as he was. But the effect of the operation—for so Napier regarded it—on her, the woman who had loved Harry, puzzled the operator. She had looked on coldly. Her self-control aroused apprehension. Inwardly she must be seething with indignation. And left alone she might be tempted once more to snatch at oblivion. He rejoiced that he had altered the combination of the cabinet. Upon the other hand, her love might have survived the ordeal, quickened by the sight of Harry's misery and distress. And at the end his passionate affirmation of desiring to save her seemed to ring true.

But was it true?

"Lord Camber," he said, "I know that so far as any possible administration of this drug is concerned *you* are innocent."

Harry answered miserably: "You have made me see how I stand, if any of the cursed drug has been taken."

"It may relieve your mind to be told that Talin leaves no trace in the human system."

"Leaves no trace——?"

"Till now it has defied my tests."

"Do you mean—er—that in the event of an examination it would be beyond the power of science to say whether it had been used or not?"

"I mean exactly that."

"Then, then——" His mind groped for the conclusion to which he had been led, blindfold. "Then a jury would have to give any accused person the benefit of the doubt?"

"I think so."

Harry dashed at the lure.

"In that case, I say again, sign the certificate."

"You believe her to be absolutely innocent?" said Napier.

"I am sure of it," Harry replied hurriedly.

"On your honour?"

"On my honour."

Slowly Napier rose from his chair, and approaching our paladin held out his hand.

"Lord Camber, perhaps I have done you injustice. If I sign this certificate now, are you prepared to vindicate your belief in Miss Yorke's innocence?"

Harry looked up. Could he have gazed into a glass, would he have recognised the famous cricketer and Imperialist in the sorry figure staring confusedly at a man not half his size and with less than a quarter of his strength.

"V-v-vindicate?" he stammered.

"Yes."

"How?"

"By marrying her in due time."

Harry winced. Then, to gain a moment, he repeated the words, "By marrying her?"

"Precisely. If your belief in Miss Yorke's innocence is strong enough to make you marry her, my belief in her, fortified by your act, would justify me, I think, in signing this certificate."

Camber set his teeth. He had his back to the wall and knew it.

"Marry her?" he growled out again.

"It's the last word, Lord Camber."

The poor fellow tried to temporise.

"You talk of marriage at such a time as this?"

"You were the first to speak of marriage. If Miss Yorke is the only woman in the world for you, and if you are convinced, as you affirm on your honour, that she is innocent, what bar is there to your marriage?"

"I won't marry her," said Harry between his teeth.

"Then you don't believe in her innocence."

The paladin exploded.

"Damn you! You don't believe in her innocence either!"

Napier replied with a smile. Beneath it Harry writhed, sensible that this man smiled, as if he, the mighty one, were of no more account than a pinch of snuff; and, with a quiver of terror, he vaguely understood that worse was to come, that this inquisitor held in reserve some other instrument of torture.

"Why do you look at me like that?" he asked with pitiable defiance.

"Miss Yorke is alone in the laboratory. The cabinet is in the laboratory."

"The cabinet!"

"Don't you understand——?"

Harry recoiled.

"You wouldn't dare——!" He broke off, shuddering.

"If she is innocent," said Napier solemnly, "you are the last man in the world to blame me for what I have done."

"You are fiendishly cold-blooded! Oh—it's too horrible. And at this moment——!" He groaned, then he said fiercely: "Open the door, sir. I insist!"

"You can open it," said Napier.

"I—I—dare not!"

"Then I will."

Napier walked to the door, opened it, and said in his ordinary voice, "Miss Yorke?"

Instantly, Esther came back into the library. Napier took her hand, and holding it addressed Harry:

"Lord Camber, I need hardly say that I sent Miss Yorke into the laboratory to test you—not her."

Harry gasped out: "To test—me?"

"For one atrocious moment last night I thought she might be guilty. The motive, the opportunity, the circumstantial evidence overwhelmed me. But after the first shock I was willing to stake my life that Esther Yorke is incapable of wilfully injuring anyone except—herself."

"Thank you," said Esther, in a whisper.

Harry's normal tone and manner returned to him.

"But you don't know for certain yet?"

Napier went to his desk and picked up the sealed envelope which Buckle had brought in.

"The result is here," he said. "The phial contained exactly two fluid drachms and twenty-seven minims of Talin." He broke open the envelope, withdrew the enclosure, and handed it with a slight bow to Esther.

"Will you read it?" he said gravely.

Esther read aloud: "The phial submitted to us for analysis contains two fluid drachms and twenty-seven minims of the new vegetable alkaloid, Talin."

"You have played a trick on me," said Harry loudly.

"You played a trick on me yesterday. I planned this scene, Lord Camber, because I wanted to find out whether you were worthy of the woman I love."

"*You* love her?" Harry exclaimed. "And you let her go in there?"

"I changed the combination of the cabinet," Napier replied. "My late patient might have been a happy woman, but she married the wrong man. I love Miss Yorke too well to allow her to make a similar mistake. That is my justification for what I have done this morning."

He spoke with extraordinary dignity, and the effect of his words upon our paladin was remarkable. At last he saw himself as these two persons saw him, stripped of his lion's skin, with never a roar left in him. And the shock of the vision nearly unbalanced a mind which disuse had somewhat atrophied. In his

weakness he clutched at what was left. His big blue eyes turned beseechingly to Esther.

"You did love me," he muttered, "and I love you."

"I never loved you," said Esther gently. "As a girl, I thought you were a hero—and I adored heroes!" She paused, recalling emotions and sensibilities dulled by years of adversity.

"You loved me when I came to you after your father's death."

"I mistook pity for love. I could have loved you then, if—if you had not marked time. I ran away from Mont Plaisir because I did not love you. If I had really loved you I should have stayed whether you meant to marry me or not. For the third time in our lives you are willing to marry me, but, always, always, Harry, you have been too late."

He had sense enough to realise that no further appeal was possible.

Happiness had hung within reach, but he had not stretched out his hands quick enough. Nobody would ever know it, except these two and himself, and we may venture to predict that this knowledge would turn the many gifts which the gods had showered upon him into galling burdens. He stared so piteously at Esther, that tears of sympathy filled her eyes.

"I wish I could help you," she whispered.

He went out, abashed.

"Can you forgive me?" said Napier, as soon as they were alone. Then, without waiting for an answer, he added confusedly: "I took for granted that you

loved Lord Camber, otherwise I should not have exposed you to such an ordeal."

"You are wonderful," replied Esther, "but before you say another word I must tell you everything. Even now you must think it astounding that I concealed so much which you ought to have known. But I owed him an enormous debt."

Then she spoke, keeping nothing back, laying her life before him. Not even to Miranda had she so unveiled her inmost self. Nor was that self spared. The man listening to her understood the much that was said and the little left unsaid; for his own strength had grown out of the weakness of the flesh. When she had finished he took her hand.

"I need not have altered the combination of the cabinet," he muttered.

"That was quite unnecessary, but you did not know that I had promised to go back to Miranda."

"And when will you come to me, Esther?"

"Come to you?"

"As my wife."

She smiled.

"You have not even asked me if—if I care," she whispered. Then, unwilling to keep him even an instant in suspense, she added: "I do care. Perhaps I have always cared, ever since the first meeting. Your eyes haunted me, the eyes of the man who I thought was going to insult me, but whose only thought has been to help me."

Outside, much snow had fallen. And through the

snow Esther went to Miranda. London had draped itself in purest white, a virginal city awaiting the warm kisses of the sun. Very soon this bridal robe must be discarded as too fine for workaday uses; and Esther rejoiced that it was so. London in blackest fog, London in whitest snow, alike were unreal and fantastic, cities of illusion. Henceforward, though mirage might allure her, what was real and substantial and enduring would alone enthrall. And, henceforward, unbeguiled by outward appearance, however fair, she would strive to penetrate beneath the surface of men and things, in an ardent quest for the divine beauty obscured, but never altogether destroyed, by the careless hands of the children of men.

THE END